

Pentecost 6 2024 THE TOUCH OF CHRIST dtw

We are extremely sensitive to touch. More so, today than ever, in the Covid environment and an increasingly litigious society. Sensitive *about* touch. We keep our social distance, on public transport, in shopping centres, at the doctor or dentist. Yes, even in church. Many no longer greet each other by hands with the peace of Christ. Sure, we all need space; we don't like people 'in our face', too close, that's for certain. But touch and touching are a huge part of what makes us human. We talk about 'keeping in touch'. We find comments or experiences to be 'touching'. When someone brought a meal to our door as we settled into the rectory, I remarked that it was a special touch.

In today's Gospel (Mk 5.21-43) there are two powerful encounters concerning touch. A woman, suffering terribly with a flow of blood, has heard about Jesus. In the trepidation of faith, she comes up behind him in the crowd and touches his cloak. She is immediately healed. Instantly, and amazingly, aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turns around and says, "Who touched my clothes?". 'And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' Ah, even you and I know what happened. Her touch was *intentional*. If you are on a bus or in a lift, with people actually so close they touch, you would know the complete difference if someone intentionally touched you. That's what Jesus felt, and he got pretty touchy! Then the woman told him the whole truth and Jesus said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease." Then, even while Jesus is still speaking, he is informed that Talitha, the daughter of Jairus, is dead. He takes her by the hand and says, "Little girl, get up", and immediately the 12-year-old gets up and starts to walk. They are overcome with amazement.

The hands and the touch of Christ must have had an amazing personal effect upon those many souls who came to him. Mark's Gospel can be a bit overwhelming with all the healings that happen, almost in rapid fire with words like 'immediate', 'now' or 'straight away'. How I would have loved that for my mother who died too early of cancer.

I know a priest who has had cancer, which was certainly a challenge to his ministry and faith. He discovered that many people didn't come too close to him when they found out. It was a lonely experience lying in his post-surgical bed. Apart from the kisses of his wife and the jabs and pokes from staff, no one actually touched him. Talk about being a leper. That's what's exciting about today's gospel; that's where the real secret of healing ministry lies, even if people don't always get cured. Jesus *was* touched; Jesus *was touched*; Jesus took Jairus' daughter *by the hand*. It would have to be one of the most simple but profound events recorded in Scripture, but it's actually up there with the greatest: the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, I suggest. 'Jesus stretched out his hand and touched' stands alongside that extraordinary statement in the first chapter of John: 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'. Put up the finest words in Scripture and none of them gets better than 'Jesus touched'. There's something about human touch. Especially for the 'untouchables' of society. It transcends words and ushers us into another realm. That's why we kiss and hug and hold and stroke. That's why we lay on hands in healing ministry; that's why we anoint with oil-coated fingers, and the healing touch of Jesus goes to work right then and there.

They say that the last senses to leave a dying person are the sense of sound and the sense of touch. That is why bed-side vigils are so important and necessary. The person feels the presence of family. The late Howell Witt, Bishop of Bathurst at the time, was in a coma for 6 weeks after a horrifying car accident.

After he had retired in Perth, he told me that, during those 6 weeks in hospital, his son would visit him each day, read the paper to him, talk to him, and bathe his face and hands. A new nurse popped into the ICU ward who didn't know the son and was surprised to see him there. He explained who he was and that he had been visiting his father and reading to him daily. She said, "well, he won't have heard much or remember it". Howell Witt opened his eyes for the first time and said, "I sure do!".

Why doesn't God change things so that all suffering is ended, and all violence halted, war banished, and justice made to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? I can't easily answer that, except to say that it looks like God set things up for us humans to have a big influence on the outcome. But what I *do* know for certain is this: the touch of Jesus is the hand of God placed on a world that God is not about to give up on, and happens to be one of the main reasons I get out of bed in the morning. How about you?

JESUS STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND

A leper came up to Jesus
And kneeling said to him
"If you will, make me whole"
Moved with pity
Jesus stretched out his hand

A great storm arose upon the sea
The boat swamped by the waves
The disciples cried out in fear
Moved with pity
Jesus stretched out his hand

"My little daughter is near death"
Jairus begged him come and see
People wept and wailed in anguish
Moved with pity
Jesus stretched out his hand

He saw a beggar blind from birth
His spit and dirt made mud
God's work would be revealed that day
Moved with pity
Jesus stretched out his hand

One Friday the sky turned black
People gazed with awe and tears
"Father forgive" they heard him say
Moved with pity
Jesus stretched out his hands

In dark hours of fire, drought and flood
We cannot always comprehend
But across this wide scarred land - still
Moved with pity
Jesus stretches out his hands

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