

**19<sup>th</sup> April 2020, Easter 2**

## **John 20. 19 – end**

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

## **Reflection**

‘Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side’.

Saint Thomas would have got on well with Victor Meldrew. Both uttered ‘I don’t believe it’ with gusto – perhaps more than once. But whereas the fictional Victor felt that the world was always against him and he could not believe what had just happened to *him*, the disciple Thomas surely simply felt left out when on the day of resurrection Jesus appeared to his closest friend, and perhaps he sullenly muttered those words whilst quietly kicking himself for being missing at the most exciting thing to happen since he had started to follow Jesus.

As it turns out his absence was crucial in leading to a beautiful encounter and a powerful message.

Frustratingly Thomas had to wait for a whole week before he saw Jesus for himself too and when Jesus appeared this time he spoke deliberately straight to Thomas, clearly knowing just what sulky words had been muttered a week earlier and inviting Thomas to go further than the others – not just to see but to reach out and touch his crucifixion wounded hands and side.

This scene – touching in both senses of the word – appears at first glance to be in direct contrast to the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene when she mistook him for the gardener. In that meeting – one of the very first following Jesus' resurrection – Jesus told Mary not to hang on to him. Many people mistake this for 'do not touch me' but Mary must have reached out and embraced Jesus in her moment of recognition. His plea is not – 'get off me woman' but 'you cant keep me to yourself, you cant hang into me, you must learn to let me go too'.

Both of these stories have produced great works of art – notably Caravaggio's *The incredulity of St Thomas* in which a stunned Thomas almost wiggles his finger in the gaping scar in Jesus' side. He really truly touches the risen Jesus. but just like Mary, he cannot grasp, cling – as Peter had to do to the earth bound Jesus just a couple of years previously when he tired to emulate his master by walking in water – and needed his grasp to stop him from drowning.



One of the lessons of this resurrection story is that of touch, physicality, engaging with the material stuff of life - with flesh and blood.

Why did Jesus invite, almost compel, Thomas to touch him? I think to prove two things:

- that Jesus was real
- and that his resurrection was real.

Firstly, Jesus was real – his resurrection was not something magic or a slight of the hand, or a trick of the light, or their eyes being deceived. Jesus was not a ghost, wispy and opaque – Jesus was really truly standing there with a solid physical body – which is why he had to go back to heaven or he would have become the eternal hippy – out of date and out of touch (excuse the pun) with the contemporary world.

And secondly, the resurrection – was physical – that is important for us – we say in our Creed that we believe in the resurrection of the body. When we say that we are not speaking about Jesus' body, but about our own bodies. If Jesus was raised physically from death then we too will have resurrection bodies that are physical, material, tangible, not in this earthly world but in the next stage of it – heaven - which is why we can't hang onto or cling to our deceased loved ones – they have physical bodies by which we will one day recognise them in the fullness of life in heaven.

Jesus was truly incarnate – the writer of the first letter of John (whoever that actually was) makes that clear as he tells his hearers that he and his friends really did meet the earthly Jesus – not just to see from a distance but to touch with their hands - he lived a human earthly life and so for Jesus touch was vital. That's why in this post resurrection story Jesus continues what he did before his death – he invited people to touch him and he touched them.

Jesus had taught about the value of touch – in his parable of the prodigal son it is the warm embrace of the loving father which is intended to touch out hearts and to demonstrate the deep love that our forgiving God has for us.

But Jesus practiced as he preached - throughout his ministry he constantly touched people - to heal, to bring wholeness through forgiveness and to restore and value ALL people. He touched lepers, women, the crippled, tax collectors, prostitutes, the feet of his disciples, and he allowed them to touch him - by

washing his feet, seeking healing and caring tenderly for him. And by all this touch he made himself unclean in the eyes of the law.

Bishop Gene Robinson, who himself knew what it was to be called unclean and to need Jesus' touch on his own life, writes this about the people Jesus touched in his earthly ministry:

'These are the people Jesus cared about – the people on the margins. Jesus made a habit of releasing people from prison. Those who lived in the prison of leprosy, the terrifying disease of his time. Can you imagine what it was like to have Jesus walk up and touch you, knowing that he was making himself ritually unclean? Can you imagine what that did for the souls of the people he touched? Those who lived in the prison of gender, reviled just for being a woman. Can you imagine Jesus treat you not like a piece of meat, not like somebody to be bartered and married off, but like a human being? No wonder women followed him everywhere and supported his ministry personally and financially. No wonder they were the ones at the foot of the cross when everybody else ran away like crazy. No wonder they were the first witnesses to the resurrection'.

*In the eye of the storm, page 82.*

But we must not overlook the fact that Jesus was also touched by those who abused him – the soldiers who struck him, Judas whose kiss betrayed him and those who held him down as others administered what Graham Kendrick poignantly calls the 'terrible kiss of the nails'.

We are reminded of the power of touch and how today too it is abused by those who should know better. Too often we hear on the News of people in all walks of life, sadly including the Church, who have taken the precious gift of touch and used it immorally for their own benefit, ignoring the fact that touch is a two way process. This must be a warning to us take great care with so intimate and beautiful a gift from God.

And so there are the two sides to touch: touching and being touched:

- Like Thomas we are invited to reach out to touch Jesus, and
- He reaches out to us and longs to touch us.

I have in mind the image of that little detail in Michaelangelo's vast painting on the roof of the Sistine chapel in which God's finger gently touches that of Adam

in creation – from that point on God has reached out to his people and longs for them – us – to respond.



In a way that is what is happening each time we receive holy communion – Jesus body is placed gently in our hands and we are touched by his love and reminded of what he did for us on the cross.

So, we are called to help others to respond to Jesus reaching out to them. That may mean being instruments of his touch:

- in anointing a sick person for wholeness and healing
- in holding the hand of a dying person
- in washing feet
- in handling the bread and wine of communion
- shaking the hand of a neighbour at the peace.

But we must be warned by the story of Judas. Touch is incredibly intimate, it is stepping into the space of another and if wrongly judged can cause immense damage. If we reach out physically to others in the name of Jesus it must be for their wholeness and not to meet our own unfulfilled needs.

None of us are perfect, we will get it wrong sometimes, but Jesus, being physical, identified with that – and that is why the physical body of Jesus died on cross – so that we can keep coming back to the father's touch of forgiveness and peace – and new life.

Every person is included in the embrace of God and we can wriggle in embarrassment in his arms and try to free ourselves, or we can reach out and touch him and enjoy his holding us.

I think I have spoken before of an experience I had in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem some years ago. In the chapel next to the Calvary chapel is a wall mosaic of Jesus being nailed to the cross. One arm is

outstretched towards us and I noticed people queueing up to place their hand in that of Jesus. I did the same, and when it came to my turn to place my hand into the wounded hand of Christ I was blown away by the power of his love for me in doing all that and allowing me to touch him.

For most of us a holding cross may be the nearest we will get to that experience. Jesus himself recognised that we won't have the benefits that Thomas did – have to believe without seeing. But he still reaches out to us and invites us to feel his touch on our lives and to respond with love, reaching back to him and out to others.

A contemporary song sums it all up like this:

When I feel the touch  
Of Your hand upon my life  
It causes me to sing a song  
That I love You, Lord  
So from deep within  
My spirit singeth unto Thee  
You are my King, You are my God  
And I love You, Lord

Right now, touch is almost taboo isn't it. We, almost desperately, long to reach out and touch others with Jesus' love – I am finding it so hard not to be able to do that as I conduct funerals in tough circumstances. We long to receive a loving hug of comfort and reassurance, to cuddle our new grandchild, to shake a hand. The time WILL come when we can touch physically once more.

For now, maybe it is time to learn afresh and anew the spiritual touch of Jesus our lives, bringing a different kind of comfort – and hope...

'Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side'.