



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

Date 10th March 2023

"When I feel the touch of Your hand upon my life, it causes me to sing a song, that I love You, Lord."

Song: Keri Jones and Dave Matthews, 1978

Luke 4:40, 5:13, 18:15.

You may have come across Rob Parsons, of 'Care for the Family'. I've heard him several times; a wonderful story-teller (not to say tear-jerker!). I remember one story he told of an older lady attending ballroom dancing classes. She didn't like ballroom dancing, but it was the only time she felt the touch and hold of another person. Perhaps you have felt or heard of a similar experience.

I've had an interest in leprosy, and have seen that one of its most damaging effects is loss of feeling in hands, feet and face. There is a poster designed for children in leprosy-affected areas showing a hammer and nail, a match and hot drink, a screwdriver and picture of a 'tug of war' (rope burns). It is designed to give an idea of the dangers for those with anaesthetic limbs. The poster also shows something that might come as a surprise: a teddy bear, the kind of soft toy that children (and many adults!) have; something to feel, to cuddle, from which to gain comfort, with feelings of smoothness and softness, drawing out expressions of gentleness, tenderness and love. We might equate it with the touch of a loved one's hand, the stroking of a dog or cat, the feel of a grand-child's hair, or..... (*put in your own equivalent!*). Imagine the loss of not being able to feel those.

So much communication is tactile; so much in relationships is conveyed *physically*, beyond words. The scientists tell us such experiences generate endorphins; the God-given 'feel-good' chemicals released in the brain by -amongst other things- physical touch. They are expressions of friendship, assurance, intimacy, bringing comfort, consolation, calm. Much can be summed up in a loving touch, a message *felt* rather than heard, especially when words are inadequate.

I am sure that's one of the reasons we understand the 'touch' of God as something tender, loving, parental, affirming. It often features in scripture and in hymns and songs. For Isaiah (6:7) and Jeremiah (1:9), the touch of God was an enabling, calming, confidence-building -and effective- experience. There are examples of the touch of Jesus in the gospels, with healing power and unspoken message. With a touch of his hand Jesus heals (Luke 4:4) and blesses (18:15). In Luke 5:13 his touch meant the man with leprosy no longer felt unclean or repellent; he was accepted, valued, blessed... by God. By his image in us God shares the many and varied expressions of touch; with their powerful meanings and messages.

But yes, of course, they can be misused, inappropriate and harmful. It is one of the dilemmas of today, with safeguarding precautions, that we are wary -even suspicious- of touch, especially when we judge (!) it to be inappropriate. That is wise, of course, but it can result in a fear or a loss of something vital to our human wholeness, something we need for emotional wellbeing and mental health, and for our imitation of Christ.

To reach out, like Jesus, with a touch or hug (as well as voice, eyes, and so on) is meaningful and precious when expressed in appropriate ways. In this, as much as in any other way -I suggest- we reflect the heart of God.