

Reading: Mark 1:40-45

Faithful God open the Scriptures to us in a fresh and exciting way.
In Jesus' name we ask it.
Amen

Verse 41 "... Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him..."

It would be easy to let this simple action of Jesus pass us by. On the way to the healing miracle we might miss what a miracle is in these three words ... "He touched him."

For us reading these accounts it can be hard to see how Jesus' touch is even recorded let alone healing. We touch people all the time so Jesus' touching doesn't surprise us at all. But to the first reader of Mark's gospel and to those who were present to experience it would have made a lasting impression. We need to put on the mindset of a first century Jew to understand.

A man was never to touch a child or a woman in public nor a sick person. And certainly never a dead person. Gentiles/non-Jews were never to be spoken too let alone touched and if you saw a leper you kept right away.

Nowhere was the mind-set of the Jew more obvious than in the Temple. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world and people came from all over the known world just to see it. Access to God was limited. There was an outer courtyard for the Gentiles, from which they could go no further. The next courtyard was for Jewish women, and they could go no further. Closer to the centre there was one for Jewish men, but if they were handicapped they could go no further. Only a circumcised, physically perfect man from the right tribe could become a priest, and then he could only go into the Holy of Holies on a certain day of the year.

Jesus' entire public ministry challenged this system of limited access to God. In his person he redrew its map of access to God by choosing to talk to, touch and heal Jews and Gentiles, both men and women; women with a flow of blood or accused of adultery; lepers, the dead, and those who had touched the dead; and people with any number of physical and mental defects. He even blessed children by touching them. If the Temple codes said that a person was unclean, Jesus welcomed him or her as a matter of policy, and touched them. At his death the Temple curtain was torn in two, symbolizing that this limited access to God is gone forever.

My experience of touching a leper came on a mission trip to Fiji. It began as a joke in one of my sermons. "I wish someone would send me to Fiji." I said, and they did. Well, the mission committee did. We visited each of the projects that the Anglican Mission's Board was doing in Fiji: water tanks, schools, toilets, Bible Colleges. They gave us (me and a man from the Missions Board) a 4WD and a minder, an enormous

man who seemed to speak 25 languages. The hospitality extended to us was so humbling. In one poor village they served us curried goat. "Do you have many goats?" I asked innocently. "Not anymore Father!" One of the people we visited was a young woman called Rose. The Missions Board was building her a toilet. When we visited only her mother was there. She greeted us with the sad news that Rose had leprosy. Would we visit her in Suva at the leper hospital? I checked with Sam, "Sure," we said. The leper hospital was something else. I noticed Sam didn't go in but stood at the door. Some people there had no legs, some had lost an arm or two. I asked for Rose. Rose looked okay. I explained who I was and asked if I could pray for her. She was keen. I don't know what possessed me but I said "Can I hold your hand?" "Sure," she said. The hand that greeted me was leprous. One finger was completely gone, another had just a pusey stub. What I remember is how cold her hand was. She was so grateful. "Vinaka." She and the whole ward said it over and over again. Gratitude for this strange kiwi bothering to visit. She taught me the meaning of gratitude that day. And I sure did wash my hands afterwards. Of course I was fine, but the curried goat gave me the worst diarrhoea!

We have all experienced the healing power of touch. We receive so much touch when we are babies and so little when we are adults. Still, in friendship touch often gives more life than words. A friend's hand stroking our back, a friend's arms resting on our shoulder, a friend's fingers wiping our tears away - these are true consolation. **These moments of touch are truly sacred. They restore, they reconcile, they reassure, they forgive, they heal.**

None of us, thank God, have leprosy, but we all have parts of our lives that need healing, parts that need Jesus' touch.

In a few moments you will come to communion. In the sacred bread and wine we will feel again the touch of Jesus. He will become a part of us and we of him. This touch is just as healing as it was for that man so long ago. We can invite Jesus to touch that part of us that needs his presence most.

A poet wrote:

Tis THE HUMAN TOUCH in this world that counts,
The touch of your hand and mine,
Which means far more to the fainting heart
Than shelter and bread and wine;
For shelter is gone when the night is o'er,
And bread lasts only a day,
But the touch of the hand and the sound of the voice
Sing on in the soul always.

If Jesus could touch you today what would you want him to heal?

Let us pray:

Christ of the healing hands
Touch us again.

Bring your healing to our lives and the lives of those we cherish
And may our touching bring only healing to others.
In Jesus name.
Amen