



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Psalm 130: 1–6 (“A prayer for help”)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

Mark 5: 25–34 (“The woman who touched Jesus’ cloak”)

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’

Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’

And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’

He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’
Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

We are still firmly in the time of Easter, so here are some more seasonal hymns to enjoy:

‘Christ the Lord is risen today’, all on earth and angels say (CH4: 411)

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing. The cross stands empty to the sky (CH4: 416)

The Lord of heaven confess, on high his glory raise (CH: 104)

Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain (CH4: 417)

The day of Resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad (CH4: 413)

In the Name of the Father and of

Throughout all the negative experiences of isolation endured in our current pandemic, one theme seems to touch people very deeply, whoever and wherever they may be. And, you might well ask, just what theme is it that touches people so very profoundly? The answer: our loss of touch at this time. Here are some examples:

Funeral directors, crematorium staff, grave diggers, ministers and priests are still taking services for grieving families, but an already difficult time is being made so much more difficult by the regulations over “personal distancing”. At a time of deepest grief, people have a completely natural – probably subconscious – urge to be physical. Who, after all, has not held someone’s hand at a funeral, or wiped away the tears of a loved one.

All of that is second nature when it comes to grieving. But right now enforcing the two-metre rule is proving to be an incredibly difficult issue, as mourners feel such a huge magnetic pull towards a relative or a friend. Some manage to keep their distance. Others do not.

These are troubled and troubling times, in so many ways.

Or consider the story I heard the other day of an adult with severe learning difficulties who has always greeted her much-loved friends with a smile and a hug and a kiss. It’s familiar. It’s part of life’s daily routine. But now those are being told: “Keep back. Don’t go too close. And certainly don’t touch.”

It seems so heartless for all concerned. This is a strange new world.

Lastly, what about those many Primary 7 children, those high school sixth years and the final year university students who have been looking forward to getting their work done and enjoying all the joys of their final term: the parties, the balls, the graduations and the heartfelt goodbyes? In so many ways, people’s lives involve socialising, making contact, being in touch.

Perhaps, it seems harsh to limit the everyday contact we all enjoy, although surely such restrictions are necessary if the battle is to be won, and won sooner rather than later.

Touch, contact, socialising: they are part of what makes us human, though right now they are presenting enormous dilemmas and considerable dangers.

In our reading today, we see the power of touch laid out before us. We have heard it already from Mark’s gospel, but let’s revisit it in the words of 1950s soul singer, Sam Cooke, from his song, *Touch the hem of his garment*:

*There was a woman in the Bible days, she had been sick, sick so very long,
but she heard that Jesus was passin' by so she joined the gathering throng.*

*And while she was pushing her way through someone asked her "what are you trying to do?"
She said, "If I could just touch the hem of his garment I know I'll be made whole."*

This woman was an outsider. Put simply, she had suffered a severe flow of blood for 12 years and this made her ritually impure according to the law, requiring her to live in isolation, alone, cast out, and – literally –untouchable.

What made this worse was that ritual impurity was considered contagious. Now this sounds ridiculous, but when we unpack what it means, I think we can see just how significant this story is. In first century Palestine, when someone unclean came into contact with another person, their dreaded ritual impurity was understood to be passed on from one to the other.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

In that situation, the person who had been touched would need to go through lengthy and demanding purification practices in order to get back to where they needed to be: where they would be seen once more as “clean” not “unclean”; “inside” the fold rather than “outside” it.

The seeming cruelty of human regulation can be a terrible thing, as we are seeing for ourselves again and again in these days of ours: social isolation; tight limits on funeral numbers; no weddings; no school proms; no graduation ceremonies. So hard for so many.

I strongly suspect that the woman in our story from Mark’s gospel would have related well to our current conditions because she had endured her own kind of social isolation for a full 12 years. And while a growing pile of doctors’ bills had left her in poverty, her medical condition had got no better and her social standing could only grow worse and worse.

Today’s story gives us one crucial insight into the situation this woman struggled with in so many ways. We are asked to see her as the singer Sam Cooke saw her: as a person of faith who wanted to get close to Jesus, even if that only meant touching the hem of his garment. And in that moment of touching, we see her faith connecting with the power of Jesus.

Just remember what *should* have happened here: Jesus should have become impure as he became a slave to the woman’s contagion. But here in this story quite the reverse happens. The moment Jesus is touched, the woman’s impurity is swept away and she is healed. As one scholar very neatly puts it: “Once again, Jesus banishes impurity and rescues the impure.”

Let’s further think about what Jesus then tells the woman who had dared to touch. He tells her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed . . .”. She trusted that Jesus could restore her health. Did she care whether he was the Second Person of the Holy Trinity? Probably not. After all, she had no doubt heard so much theology from those clerics who liked to say, “No.” For her, real, living faith was a matter, not of learning, or of understanding, but of *confidence*: confidence in what Jesus would do for her.

Today, times are tough. The experts tell us that we are in the very depths of the coronavirus crisis, with no sign of an early exit from the conditions which we are all finding so incredibly difficult to cope with. Currently, we cannot touch others as once we could. But that surely makes it all the more important for each one of us to think, and to rethink how it is that we can engage in what we might call, “contactless contact”. We need new and imaginative ways to touch *without touching*, be it through e-mails or phone conversations or Zoom sessions like the ones which we are offering Sunday by Sunday. These have their limitations. But never, ever underestimate their power as instruments of God’s grace in these hard days.

Today I am going to finish with a reading from the writer Dorothee Soelle, who tells us about the faith of the woman who reached out to touch. Like so many, she found divine power: a life-giving power which brought liberation:

It was the faith of this despised, injured woman that made her whole. In this touching and letting ourselves be touched, we experience the power of God. We must regard the [miracles] as stories of the love that lives in the world and liberates. We rightly understand the [miracles] when we remember Jesus’ summons to his female and male disciples to heal the sick themselves, to drive out demons, to feed the hungry, and to proclaim the good news. Amen.

Praying for others

This powerful “Prayer for a Pandemic” comes to us from the United States:

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips remember those that have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our countries, let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbours.

Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers gifts:

When I worked in a large financial services company almost everyone worked in some sort of team. We often had workshops in which we explored how to work better together. These usually involved thinking about different roles people play. Observant academics would come up with these roles. One model had Co-ordinator, Completer-Finisher and Resource Investigator, amongst others. Each role in the team was really a description of a person with particular skills and abilities. Another name for these is gifts. You need a range of gifts for teams to work well.

What has this to do with church and current times? I have been really struck by the teamwork displayed across the village and the many gifts on display. We have people with empathy and an ability to chat calling the isolated on the phone. Others have the gift of organization – matching volunteers with those who need help, for example. Some are great cooks and help prepare meals for those struggling to cook for themselves. There are those for whom technology is not a scary thing and who help us continue to reach out using those new ways. The creative amongst us make beautiful, hand-made face masks for friends and neighbours. Or take lovely photographs and post them online so we can all enjoy somewhere beautiful, virtually at least. Shopkeepers and volunteers deliver shopping or prescriptions to those who can't go out.

Paul talks about the gifts of the Spirit. He mentions miracle-working amongst them. We usually think of raising the dead or feeding the 5,000. But every day in this crisis we see the miracle of a hand of friendship extended to pull us back from the brink of loneliness, or food appearing from afar on our doorstep so we don't go hungry. Gifts of the Spirit, active amongst us today.