

Sermon preached by Canon Chris Andrews  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sunday 1 July 2018

***Text: Mark 5. 21-43***

---

Keeping in touch. Think of all the ways we do it: emails, phones, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp whatever that is - and dear old pen and ink. Keeping in touch with each other isn't exactly difficult these days. But we often still close a conversation with the words, Keep in touch. Three little words, that for some people who feel genuinely isolated or lonely can mean, Please keep in touch. Don't forget about me. I really value this contact with you.

I would guess that keeping in touch is the very purpose of the people specially with us in the cathedral today, the people involved with Mesothelioma awareness and action, an invaluable network, as you probably know, for those who are living with a condition caused by exposure to asbestos and, just as important, a network for their supporters, their family members and carers as well. Just coming together like this once a year at the cathedral from across our whole region is such a positive gesture, underlining the crucial importance of keeping in touch for all who are affected by this condition.

I am very struck by the logo on the leaflet of the Anglia Support Group of this network. Here are three figures with interlocking arms. And below it, to reinforce this message is a photograph of four real people in strong physical contact, with their arms around each other's shoulders. It is a simple and powerful image - the keeping in touch is real and physical. This is the strengthening and reassuring touch that we can bring to each other, one human being in solidarity with another especially when there is a need.

Keeping in touch. You can see clearly in the ministry of Jesus around the villages and towns of Galilee how powerful was Jesus's use of his hands, reaching out to those who were disabled or ill or in need. Many of these were the poor and despised outcasts, shunned by polite society, the untouchables. Isn't that a terrible term - untouchables? We remember how many millions in India today are untouchables, Dalits, still struggling in the lowest caste to be free of the lifelong, unending prejudice, oppression and misery it brings with it.

Jesus reached out to touch the untouchables deliberately. In the gospel reading today we saw Jesus with the woman with the incurable haemorrhage and then with the apparently dead young daughter of Jairus. Both the woman and the dead child were untouchable if you were Jew and wanted to stay ritually clean. With both of them Jesus incurred ritual uncleanness just by touching them. And it didn't stop him for a moment.

It was touch that brought healing and new life to both of them. Jairus, the desperate father knew just what he wanted and pleaded with Jesus, just come and lay your hand on my daughter and she will be well again and live. Jesus responded to the faith of this man, came to their home, took the girl by the hand and she got up and he gave her back to her parents. A little resurrection.

Then, fascinatingly, in the case of the older woman with the haemorrhage, the power of touch worked in the other direction. It was the woman who did the touching, not Jesus. Seizing her opportunity in the crowd, in a moment of faith and desperation she reached out and touched Jesus. Well, not Jesus himself. She could only just reach to touch his cloak, the edge, the fringe of his clothing. And that moment, after years and years, her haemorrhage was healed. Notice that Jesus needed to own what had happened and who it was who touched him. When the woman owned up Jesus affirmed her without hesitation. "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." For both the girl and her parents, and for the older woman Jesus made a touching place.

And here I can't help thinking of the words of the gifted musician and wordsmith John Bell with his colleague Graham Maule from the Iona Community. In the chorus of their hymn commonly known as Touching Place, ( 312 in our book) come these words: "Christ makes with his friends a touching place." "To those who cry in pain or disgrace, Christ makes with his friends a touching place."

So simple. So powerful. So Jesus. And notice that the words say Christ makes the touching place not on his own but "with his friends". Jesus Christ never kept to himself the ministry of offering reassurance, soothing and healing to people in need. We know that immediately after Pentecost the apostles continued Jesus's ministry to those in need. And then countless people down the ages, including you and I, have been and are the "friends" with whom the touching places of healing and restoration by God's grace are

possible. You and I as baptised Christians all have our part to play in making possible the touching place today. Go to any service of prayer and the laying on of hands in our church, as monthly in this cathedral, and you will see this ministry offered by clergy and lay people equally and together, for those who wish to receive it. Christ makes with his friends a touching place.

A final thought in this connection about you and me and our role in this ministry. Remember the woman seeking healing in the crush and crowd around Jesus. She didn't touch Jesus himself, his body, she touched his garment, the hem of it. You might think that you and I are, as it were, the hem of the clothing of Christ now, a touching place with Christ – and we make a very long hem indeed if you think of all of us Christians in the world today. Together and as individuals we are a touching place with Christ for people whom we know. For some of them we may be the only contact point.

Our friends from the mesothelioma network with us today are a living parable of the same truth. No-one should have to cope on their own. God has made us for one another.

As we look forward happily to the arrival of Joe Hawes as Dean here, he must know firmly from us that he will not be on his own in his ministry here. Rather that Joe joins us as a body of people who actively share with him and with each other our calling under God to be one of the touching places with Christ, unreservedly, for all the people of this town and community and all who come to this place. It is all we are here for.

Amen.

© Chris Andrews 2018