

Our reading from St Luke's Gospel (36b-48) tells us that after Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, they returned to Jerusalem and reported the event to the eleven apostles who were gathered in a room. Whilst they were describing what had happened, Jesus stood among them and startled them into thinking he was a spirit. But Jesus reassured them that he was real by telling them to handle his hands and feet, to touch him. In last week's Gospel reading from St John (20.24-31) we had a similar story, when the apostles were together. Then Jesus stood among them and told the Doubting Thomas: "Put your finger here ... and place it in my side". Jesus knew that the one way to help Thomas believe was through physical contact, the power of touch. Throughout his earthly ministry, particularly in the easing of human problems, Jesus used the power of touch. These stories are relevant to every person here, in emphasising the power of touch: the magic of touch.

One of the common causes of human problems today is the simple failure of some people to make contact with others. It is the great paradox of our time. We can send people to the moon. We surround our skies with communication satellites. But we find it harder and harder to communicate with the minds of those we love. The biggest single cause of marriage breakdown is lack of communication. Communication goes far beyond mere words. Any counsellor will hear such remarks as: "But he doesn't listen to me anymore" or "I can't seem to get through to her" or "We no longer speak to each other". Many of us have said such things. But when bewildered people used to come to me for counselling, some were surprised when I ask: "When did you last hold your wife's arm on a walk?" or "Have you stroked your husband's neck since your courting days?" or "When did you last have a rough and tumble with your children on the living room floor?" Hopefully this encouraged them to re-learn that the most effective means of communication is the universal but sadly neglected language of touch. Every courting couple instinctively knows the power of touch, but many neglect it once they marry. Yet it is the remedy for many problems.

Love is the climate in which living things can flourish and develop; and a single touch can evoke the right atmosphere. A father gently ruffles his son's hair and in that casual gesture expresses pride and joy, which is infectious to the boy. A lady lovingly brushes a hair from her man's coat lapel and thereby shows her pride in him. A man helping his lady up a step gives her elbow a gentle squeeze and for a moment says "I love you" just as clearly as if the words were emblazoned in a neon sign. But many have persuaded themselves that there is something weak or wrong in showing affection physically. We are amused at the embrace with which Latin men greet one another. But it is us who are the silly ones. A cherry greeting and a strong handshake, generates more warmth than our more conventional "How do you do - don't touch me" approach. I always greet people with a handshake when they leave church but this is not usual with some clergy. We tend to keep people more at arm's length these days, even in family life.

The emphasis on hygiene is partly to blame. New babes are seldom born at home so are isolated in sterile cribs. Mothers can no longer breathe germs over the new bundle of joy and Dad's grimy

fingers no longer tickle the new-born chin. Infant mortality has thereby decreased but too often this clinical isolation is allowed to persist into adolescence. Babies, like puppies and kittens, need to be fondled and touched by their parents. It is the only way they can learn the power of love through touch. Closeness, tenderness, touch. These are the ingredients so often missing in the lives of people who need help. Fortunately they are ingredients that can be put back; if their importance is understood.

Love is like gratitude; it is no good unless you share it. I have a very warm feeling for the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. When the wayward boy finally came home, his Father did not wait in the doorway with a smug smile and a flabby handshake. Remember what the bible says: "He ran and embraced him and kissed him"! In contrast a juvenile court judge said that although hundreds of young offenders had appeared before him in court with their parents, not once had he seen a parent put a protective arm around a frightened youngster's shoulder.

When children ran to Jesus, he took them in his arms. When he wanted to heal a leper or restore a blind man's sight, he touched them. All our church sacraments use touch, be it in baptism, confirmation, marriage, or communion. We would lose much of the effectiveness of our Communion service if we merely collected the bread and wine from a table, instead of receiving it from the hands of one who cares for us. The belief that the 'laying on of hands' may effect healing was practiced throughout the ancient East; and is practiced here today. When I laid my hands in the name of God on some-one in a great deal of pain, the next day that person said it was the first night of complete sleep for over a year. Perhaps it was coincidence! Some might think it is autosuggestion; never the less the relief from pain is often real. All doctors know that the healing process is influenced by the patient's state of mind. God does not mind who gets the credit!

Sadly our modern society with its taboos and restraints, and its current obsession with sexual abuse, precludes close physical contact with others. Abuse certainly does happen: but if we are not careful, we will see it where it does not exist, and prevent an essential part of family love from maturing. Sometimes greater long-term and lasting emotional damage can be caused to a child by removing it from a loving home even when suspicions are justified; and certainly when the suspicions are not. Whether we wish to show affection, or compassion in bereavement or stress, an instinctive hug is worth a thousand words. Also if someone comes to you for help much information can be gained from their handshake. There is quite a language in the different ways people shake hands; just as one can read a lot from a person's eyes.

The human language of communication between one person and another depends on words, on the eyes, and on the power of touch. If we lose any one of these media, we reduce our ability to communicate with people in need. The magic of touch is that it can express love and concern: create confidence: ease pain: and give to mankind its humanity. Equally important, touch can help to communicate and strengthen faith. Jesus told Thomas to touch him and believe; if Jesus felt the

need to use the power of touch; surely so should we.