

# Along the track

## The Gift of Touch

There are so many gifts we take for granted – like being able to see, hear, speak. Imagine our life without even one of them. It is hard to appreciate, for example, how much we depend on touch. Touch is not just about the physical. Psychologists tell us that touch is our primary language of compassion. Our faith life can benefit from a healthy dose of touch too!

Some of my most precious memories concern the gift of touch - just holding a loved one's hand, for example. Holding my children for the first time was an extraordinary experience, being able to pick them up and feel the warmth of this new little life beginning its journey. I once held and turned the pages of a manuscript that was over thirteen hundred years old; I held a chunk of concrete from the Berlin Wall, and a piece of moon rock. Isn't it amazing to visit a museum to see and experience the extraordinary works of art, music and literature, the work of such talented human hands. To see Michelangelo's sculptures, the work of such a unique artisan and such imagination is deeply moving. Isn't it amazing to see what 'miracles' can be performed in the hands of a gifted surgeon.

We can undervalue the work of human hands. I began teaching in what was known as a 'technical school'. Many, if not most of the students who came there found mainstream schools difficult so they were sent 'to work with their hands'. Educationally it was seen as a place of last resort! It seems we still have a hierarchy of human endeavour – the intellectual and academic, those who pursue the world of business and finance over those who labour in the paddocks or the gardens, the factories or in the trades and crafts, those who care for the home. In schools and colleges and universities, do we really value those 'who work with their hands'? But all of them have their value, their dignity - all of them are needed.

Everyday experiences of touch and feeling can move us beyond the ordinary, they too can inspire us, they speak to us of the spiritual, the emotional, the Divine. During one Good Friday ceremony I attended, the Cross was passed seat by seat around the church – people raised their hands and grasped the cross and passed it over to the seat behind. It was a very moving experience.

Some of the most beautiful imagery in the Bible highlights the significance of touch. In Genesis the imagery of God forming the man from the dust of the ground is followed by the image of God as a potter:

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.  
(Isaiah 64: 8)

In one of the most poignant expressions of God's love, the psalms tell us that 'I have carved your name on the palm of my hands,' (Ps 49:16)

Jesus was very tactile in quite a number of his miracles. At Bethsaida, Jesus takes a blind man by the hand and leads him outside the village. Jesus puts spit on the man's eyes. He begins to see people, but 'they look like trees moving'. Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was completely restored. (Mk 8: 22-24)

We read often in the Gospels how Jesus puts his hands on people, how he embraces them.

"When the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them." (Luke 4:40)

"Jesus put out His hand and touched him . . . So He touched her hand . . . He went in and took her by the hand . . . Then He touched their eyes . . . Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand . . . Jesus came and touched them . . . Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray..."

Jesus wasn't afraid to touch others – the skin of those suffering from leprosy and enduring the exclusion and isolation that came with it. Touch brought more than healing of the illness but the joy of acceptance, of being included once again. Jesus did not hesitate to handle the dirty feet of His disciples but that gesture carried a far deeper message of love and service, humility.

The father in Jesus' story of the prodigal son was "filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him" What that embrace and kiss must have meant to his son!

At the heart of the celebration of the Eucharist, the work of human hands is acknowledged in an extraordinary way: Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life...we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink.

Those few words remind us that the work of our hands is holy when consecrated to the service of God and each other. When we cook and clean, wash and sew, when we grow grain and vegetables and crops and trees, we participate in the ongoing process of creation. When we repair what has been broken, when we build and paint, when we weave and carve, when we recycle, and clean, when we embrace those we love and care for the sick and comfort those who mourn with our touch or embrace, we contribute to building a better world and to making the Reign of God a reality. That is our gift to the future.

Regards  
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