

Sermon preached at St Marylebone Parish Church on the Third Sunday of Lent 2020

By the Priest Pastor, The Revd Katy Hacker Hughes

Who would have thought that the thing we would all be fasting from this Lent would be human touch? The Corona Virus means that we have to adopt what is described as 'social distancing' – a term that epidemiologists are using to refer to a conscious effort to reduce close contact between people and hopefully delay or reduce community transmission of the virus.

We must avoid shaking hands, hugging, kissing, physically sharing the peace, sharing the common cup. For those who are introverts, or shy or who find physical touch difficult, this might be a relief.

But for others, it goes against the grain, even though we know and accept that it is a very necessary precaution.

For those who are a bit socially isolated it may feel rather painful as the greeting of fellow Christians on Sunday may be one of the only times during the week that someone expresses affection and fellowship.

Maybe the reason it feels awkward and cold is that touch is at the heart of Christian faith and practice: Jesus used touch to heal, he washed his disciples feet, he was betrayed by a kiss, his tortured face was wiped on the way of the cross, he told doubting Thomas to touch the scars on his resurrected body.

The church uses touch to baptize, bless, anoint, confirm, ordain, to lay on hands for healing, to share the peace.

In fact, Jesus' ministry would have been a nightmare for public health officials. Because he specifically touched and drew close to those who were considered unclean, and unapproachable, and allowed them to touch him and come close to him.

A sinner wept over his feet and dried them with her hair, much to the disgust of Simon the Pharisee.

The ritually unclean woman with the flow of blood touched him in the crowd, and was healed and blessed. Jesus laid hands on Jairus's dead daughter, again making him ritually unclean.

He regularly laid hands on and healed great crowds of the sick, He healed lepers.

In fact the only time he told someone not to touch him was when he told Mary Magdalene that she should stop clinging on to him and go to be the apostle to the Apostles, bearing the message of the Resurrection.

Jesus told parables about this subject too: the filthy prodigal son who had been working amongst the unclean pigs was embraced by his loving father as he returned, rather than being sent to the servants quarters to clean up.

The Good Samaritan lifted the man who fell among the thieves onto his donkey, and bathed his wounds, unlike those who avoided him for fear of contamination.

And today's gospel tells us the story of another good Samaritan; another member of that despised minority who good Jews wouldn't dream of sharing a saucepan with.

But Jesus meets her, asks for a drink from her bucket and has the longest recorded conversation between himself and anybody else in the scriptures. Someone who was socially distanced by being a woman and a Samaritan became a highly effective apostolic witness; in fact in the Orthodox tradition she is named as St Photine, which means radiant light, and there are all sorts of apocryphal traditions about what happened in the rest of her life, as she continued to preach and to witness.

So today we hold two things in tension: touch as an act of Christian love; the refraining from touch also as an act of Christian love. As Ecclesiastes puts it, there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. As we fast from touch, it could make us think about it and appreciate it; once we can do it again, we may be more appreciative, more sensitive, more intentional.

In the meantime, how are we as Christians to respond to this time of crisis? How are we to show the love of Christ to one another when we have to keep our distance?

Well, number one, we pray. Pray that the spread of the virus will slow down, and that people who are ill will recover. Pray for a vaccine, pray for those who are isolated at home and for healthcare workers.

Number two, we wash our hands. I was quite surprised to hear that only 60% of women wash their hands after going to the lavatory; and only 30% of men. Although I'm sure those statistics don't apply to the congregation of St Marylebone, it's a bit of a wake up call to us all, especially to the gentlemen!

Number three, we open our hearts to our neighbours, sharing concern, practical help, a kindly phone call. I was in my office on Friday when I heard about a member of our young church Daisy who took in a spare pack of loo roll to school for a friend who had run out. I asked permission from her mum to tell you this.

We've seen the empty shelves in the supermarket - stockpiling is selfish, illogical and unchristian; we would all do well to follow Daisy's example. In Luke 3:11 John the Baptist says 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise'.

That applies to sanitizer and loo roll and formula milk!

Number four, we find other ways to express our Christian love for one another liturgically.

Sharing the peace is very important; after we have confessed our sins, been absolved and pray for our neighbours, we share with them an act of reconciliation – expressing and declaring the peace that Christ has made for us.

We turn from facing the front to see the face of Christ in our neighbour.

Ephesians 4:3; make every effort to maintain the bond of peace.

When the risen Jesus appears to his disciples, the words he uses are ‘Peace be with you’, just as St Paul often begins his letters to the churches with the words ‘Grace and peace be with you’.

It’s an ancient greeting which emphasizes that we must be at unity with each other as we approach the altar of God. We can’t do this physically for the moment, but we can still greet one another. Here are a couple of suggestions:

say Peace be with you, and look into your neighbour’s eyes as you do it;

it’s easy when one is shaking hands to rush on to the next person

without really making eye contact. You could wave while you do it.

You could put your hand on your heart as you say it. You could use the Namaste greeting, hands together with a slight bow which means ‘I bow to the divine in you’.

Or you could use the British Sign Language greeting. However you do it, now is a time when we need the peace of the Lord particularly.

Life feels very uncertain at the moment, the news changes from day to day.

But as Christians we have a strategy;

we put our trust in God, we wash our hands and we love our neighbour.

I’m going to end with some words of Mother Julian of Norwich

who lived during the time of the Black Death, and then finally some from St Paul

Mother Julian first:

‘God said not, thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased, but he said ‘thou shalt not be overcome’.

And St Paul

For **I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**