

SERMON: Sunday – 19 February 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Reach out and touch

Hosea 11:1-11

Mark 5:25-34

Anyone who's tried to get an appointment to see a GP will share to some small extent in the suffering of the woman from today's Gospel reading. A woman we are told who'd spent everything on seeing a doctor in order to get healed.

Of course, having a NHS which is free at the point of need, means that we at least are not in her position of having to spend everything in order to get well.

Thank God for the NHS which should maybe be renamed the national healing service.

But what we do have in common with the haemorrhaging woman is that we've both heard about Jesus and that Jesus is within our reach.

27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 because she thought, 'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.' 29 Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

(Slide)

It brings to mind the words of the great singing prophetess, Diana Ross:

Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can.

Maya Angelou quote

And I think we should take from this encounter that Jesus wants to know **who** has reached out and touched him.

Think about that for a moment - Jesus wants to know.

He wants to know. Why?

He wants to know because all of this is about relationship. He sees himself as being in relationship with this woman. He calls her daughter.

'Daughter, your faith has healed you.

Not his daughter of course but this woman is a daughter as he is a son. They are brother and sister, children of the same father in heaven, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the rest.

So if a previously unknown woman in a huge crowd is called by Jesus a daughter of God then it means that each person in the crowd shares the same potential. Each one is/can be a child of God. Maybe we should say each one has the capacity to come to the realisation that he or she is a child of the Holy One.

But what was it that made this woman realise her potential as a daughter?

Well it was her faith wasn't it?

Jesus wants to know who reached out and touched, firstly because its all about affirming that relationship that each person has with God; and secondly because he wants to encourage faith. He wants to see people connect with God through him, by touching him, which to do so is the great test of faith.

'Daughter, your faith has healed you.

In other words Faith like this can heal you. We can be healed by faith as she was.

In Hebrews 11 we're told that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen".

The woman desperately hoped to be made well but she had to exercise that conviction by taking a risk to reach out.

People have said that faith is spelled RISK and that's evident here. She takes a risk to reach out and touch Jesus. Remember she's a woman in a patriarchal society and she's considered unclean due to her bleeding. She wouldn't normally take the risk to be seen in public let alone touch a rabbi growing in popularity.

She may have been absolutely desperate and this was a last resort but that's ok because that maybe more closely resembles faith the size of a mustard seed. Faith isn't dependent on how much one already (though I think it does become more familiar the more one exercises it) but in general I think faith

has more to do with how much one is prepared to exercise what one does have. Anyone can do it therefore.

In other words you don't need a lot of faith or be very religious in order to show faith. I often meet people who say they are not very religious but that doesn't mean they can't show faith. Sometimes they just need to see something attractive.

For the woman who reached out to touch the edge of Jesus cloak, she must've seen something in Jesus. Or heard something attractive about him. Or there must at least have been that desperate hope that things could be better;

A hope that perhaps God was real; that there was a benevolent force behind all things; an inherent goodness in creation; that means we're not all here simply by accident but by some deliberate design and purpose;

and that this benevolent force is at the root and source of each one of us and that somehow we are all inter-related to and through this one great spirit of life which made itself perfect in the human weakness of Jesus the man from Nazareth.

Jesus was right. This kind of tiny faith makes people well. To think or feel otherwise will surely drag us down, make us despondent and depressed, lead us to care only for ourselves and ultimately result in a sad death; though of course even that is not beyond the God who is the Resurrection and the Life.

Your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.

That was Jesus word to woman and its his word to each of us today.

Your faith will heal you. Go in peace and know you are free from suffering.

Now this is not to say that we will never suffer; that we won't ever limp or hobble or cough and splutter; get colds, flu, fall and break bones, or even worse.

Whilst we're walking in faith and pear and freedom we still get sick. This is the paradox of living in the not yet fullness of the Reign of God. We live in its Promise but not yet its totality. We've got the foretaste but the banquet is still to come.

Peter the disciple and apostle wrote in his second letter about the importance of listening well to the prophets of old when he wrote,

You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts.

(2 Peter 1:19b NLT)

We're in the days foretold by the prophets of old, like Hosea whom we hear earlier,

For someday the people will follow me.
I, the Lord, will roar like a lion.
And when I roar,
my people will return trembling from the west.
Like a flock of birds, they will come from Egypt.
Trembling like doves, they will return from Assyria.
And I will bring them home again,"
says the Lord.

(Hosea 11:10-11 NLT).

I will bring them home again was both a promise to end Israel's exile and return to their homeland 800 years before Jesus was born as well as a future promise of hope for all generations.

All generations would be asked to live out the hope of such a promise. And that's where faith comes in.

Life has a habit of draining hope from us like water being squeezed out of a wet sponge but there are always opportunities all around for faith to be replenished; opportunities to reach out and touch the God who comes to us as Christ, always within reach for those with eyes willing to see.

The Scriptures speak to us still of the hope of the Reign of God being fulfilled and all things made well. It's that hope we're each called to cling to, to walk in, to celebrate, to proclaim; like the woman healed, to go in peace, made well and in the process of being fully healed, day by day until the last day comes.

Living by this culture of hope, faith and love is what the people of our world needs to hear and to see and to be enabled to reach out and touch for themselves. How can we be agents, ambassadors in the crowds we find ourselves? How can we take the risk to reach out? How can we enable others to reach out and touch for themselves that they might feel it for themselves that they have been healed and know themselves a child of God?

Let us pray,

Lord, thank you that you are so accessible; that we can reach out and touch you in so many ways.

May we have the courage to practise this day by day for ourselves and for the others we meet.