

**Maundy Thursday 2010**  
**John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

**Personal Touch Matters!**

Seventy years ago, a young Desmond Tutu was growing up in a South Africa strictly polarized along racial lines. One day he witnessed the unthinkable - a white man in a flowing black cassock doffed his hat to Tutu's mother, a domestic worker. Tutu says that at such a young age - primary school age or thereabouts - he "was bowled over at this sign of respect" by a white man for a black woman. This cleric was the legendary Trevor Huddleston, priest and activist. The influence Huddleston went on to have over Desmond Tutu's life was undoubtedly world-changing.

Huddleston believed fervently in the doctrine that "all of us are created in the image of God. That makes us each one not just important, but endows us with infinite worth so that we deserve not just respect but veritable reverence, for each of us is God's viceroy, God's representative. We are sanctuaries of the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Something as simple as doffing one's hat, or a hand touched in a kind gesture or a person to person responsiveness serves powerfully as a sign, a mark of the other person having value and worth. It's well documented in medical, psychological and other healing circles that human touch, human attentiveness is a powerful factor in healing. Sometimes it's the only way to communicate. It's also well documented that harsh or unwholesome touch has harmful, even toxic and traumatic, effects in people's lives.

And take note of what our prayer book says about the Greeting of Peace - that time of touch in our Eucharist: it is "an encounter, a reconciliation and an anticipation....As an encounter it reminds us that we meet Christ in others and without that encounter it is impossible to meet God...as an anticipation, it dramatises the Holy Communion as a foretaste of the banquet in the kingdom of God. The peace and unity experienced provide a glimpse of the kingdom which is yet to come... The Greeting of Peace prepares us for the sacramental meal which follows.

Why this information on this night, Maundy Thursday? This is the night when we hear the story of Jesus washing his disciple's feet; this night when Jesus leaves us with the command -mandatum, the word root of Maundy - that "*you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"

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<sup>1</sup> As reported by Desmond Tutu

Trevor Huddleston wrote "You cannot love an abstraction".<sup>2</sup> It's the personal touch that matters: one gesture can make a difference.

The personal touch matters. Being present, not just **with**, but being present **to**, another person makes a difference. Our attention given to the other, our acceptance of them, our body language that tells them we're with them, says to them that *they matter*. Each of us knows what it's like when we're ignored, or if we're treated as if we're not there, as if we don't count. As I write this, I remember moving to a new church, not knowing anyone, being left on my own in the middle of the large crowd at morning tea – and feeling isolated, ignored and altogether discounted, in the midst of this, fleeing into the toilets to cry.

The personal touch matters. On this night, Jesus took a towel and knelt down before his followers and washed his disciples' feet. Don't think for a moment they would have been clean feet. They would have traipsed in flimsy sandals, at most, through dust and dirt and people's garbage and worse in the streets. At this meal, with this gesture, he symbolised his whole way of being with people.

Peter's response of shock and discomfort sums up the effect Jesus' actions had on the people present: "No, you shall never wash my feet!" this is the unthinkable – the master stooping so low. This did not fit the paradigm of power that a master, leader, such as Jesus was expected to adhere to. He's the one who should be served! The unthinkable, just like that young priest Huddleston dipping his hat to a black woman – the effect of that on one small African boy helped to change the course of history.

In this singular action it is as if Jesus is saying: this is how God is with us – taking a towel and washing our feet – meeting us intimately and immediately at the lowest point of our need. And this, too, is what he would be doing on the cross. Submitting to the human forces of destruction that oppose the holy and the good; not exerting the power he had, but in dying a cruel and painful death – imagine the touch, the feel of those nails driven in – he became the servant of the whole of humanity.

Jesus was a man who lived out of the intimacy and immediacy of the knowledge of being seen and known and loved by God. This was – if you like – the inner secret of who he was and what he did. At his baptism he experienced this sense of being seen – and recognized – and valued. "This is the One I love, the One I delight in." This became the continuing reference point and guiding star of his life – to which he must surely have returned again and again. Jesus knew – in the deepest recesses of his being – the depths and the immediacy of how God was **present** to him – and it was the knowledge of this presence that made all the difference.

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<sup>2</sup> From *Naught for your Comfort*:

On this night, personal touch matters. It is the symbolism of aligning our lives with Christ's. Of not just serving each other in great humility as we wash one another's feet, but of allowing that intimacy to be extended to us. "The task of washing these feet is one of devotion. It goes deep into identification with Jesus". In an old tradition, still practised in some places today, the final part of the ceremony is to kiss the foot you have just washed. We're not doing that here. But this kiss is also a sign of veneration and love. Many priests, myself included, kiss the gospel book and the altar as a statement that both are places of encounter with Christ. Kissing the feet –or as we do it, just in the washing and handling of each other's feet - similarly indicates a place of meeting with Christ, in each other.

Tonight, in this personal touch, we meet Jesus. Not a distant impersonal divinity, not an abstraction or theory of love<sup>i</sup>. We meet Jesus in each other; we meet Jesus present with us. Lest we try to personalize this to an individualized message, we hold onto the context of this personal touch – in community, for community. For us as the body of Christ, to form and be formed after the example of Christ. And as we gather around the table of the Lord, as the disciples did on this night, we encounter Jesus, too, in the bread and wine that he took and offered.

On this night, personal touch matters.

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<sup>i</sup> Parts of this sermon attributed to Rev Philip Carter (Julian Centre, Adelaide), and to the Rt Rev Martin Warner (Church Times, Maundy Thursday, 2010)