**WHO TOUCHED MY CLOTHES? Mark 5.30 (21-40)**

There’s a new pilgrimage centre on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It’s been built by the Roman Catholics on the site of the recently-excavated fishing village of Magdala, where Mary Magdalene came from. Amongst the chapels in the beautiful main building of the pilgrim centre is the Encounter Chapel which has on the wall behind the altar a large mural of the woman with the flow of blood reaching out to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe. (There it is in the photo on the screen, with the altar in front). All you see is a ground-level view of the hand about to make contact with the robe. But the effect is electric. It’s the moment that changed her life.

‘Who touched me?’ said Jesus.

Let’s enter that story from the point of view of the woman herself….

*It feels like my last chance. Twelve years of this interminable bleeding. I’ve tried everything, believe me. I had money once, did you know that? No more. It’s all gone on useless doctors. It’s not their fault, of course, but whose fault is it then? Is it mine?*

*One thing I do know – it’s disgusting. Finding rags, washing rags, disposing of rags - my life is all rags. And still the bleeding goes on. It never seems to end. It’s utterly exhausting. It feels like my life is being washed away all the time. I wonder how long my wretched body can keep going.*

*I hate my body.*

*And of course this bleeding means I’m always unclean, impure, untouchable. My husband was pretty clear about that, and he’s long gone. I’m sure the other women in the village know what’s going on. I don’t tell them outright of course, but sometimes I hear it on the street: ‘There’s the dirty woman.’*

*Who am I? I’m the woman who bleeds.*

*But then this miracle man arrives. At least that’s what I’ve heard about him. People get healed. And he preaches like an angel. As I said, it could be my last chance. I know it’s getting worse – I’m wiped out most of the time. On the other hand, if I go up to him and ask for his help everyone will know what’s been going on and it’ll be all over the village before nightfall. The shame, the shame.*

*Should I go and find him? Yes? No?*

*I must.*

*So I watch for his arrival, surrounded, as you’d expect, by crowds of eager people. These are my neighbours, people who might have been friends in another life. It’s pretty chaotic, people pressing in on him, his friends trying to make a path for him. Something about Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, needing help. I think if I can wriggle my way through these hot, excited bodies maybe I can get close enough just to touch him. I’ve been told that sometimes that’s all that’s needed with these miracle people. Just a touch. Then I’ll slip out of the crowd without anyone knowing I’ve been there. But I’ll be well. Won’t I? Anyway, I’ve tried everything else.*

*Yes, I know I shouldn’t be doing this, getting in amongst all these people, what with me being unclean and all that. It offends the precious purity codes they go on about in the synagogue (another place I can’t go). But I’m desperate, so I’m going into that crowd.*

*My heart is pounding. Just a touch, just a touch… I’m reaching out – and missing. Try again – miss again. There are bodies surging around him. It’s all pushing and shoving and me trying to find a way through… I don’t dare to look at the people around me; they might recognise me and see what I’m doing. I’m only looking at that one person, and how to get near him. Just a touch… I think I can reach the back of his robe… just a touch…*

*Got it!*

*Wow - what* ***have*** *I got? I feel something rushing through me, a power, a cleansing, a feeling like summer, like fresh water on a hot day. I know something has changed in me - I know it has! Is this real? Is this me? Is this paradise? I’m standing in the market place, dazed, as the crowd surges past me. I know my bleeding has stopped.*

*Then suddenly as fast as it happened a moment ago it all goes horribly wrong, and I come down to earth with a bang. He’s stopped too, and he’s looking around. ‘Who touched my clothes?’ he says.*

*Oh no, please don’t. Please don’t show me up. Please don’t make me an exhibit, ‘the woman who used to bleed.’ Please just give me a smile (he has a lovely smile) and carry on to help Jairus with whatever his problem is. There’s no need for this public humiliation.*

*But he’s still standing there, waiting. Please don’t do this. Why is it necessary? Please don’t add to my shame…*

*I know I have a choice. I can try and bluff it out, look as puzzled as everyone else and wait for this awkward moment to pass. Or I can come clean, I can come out, I can meet Jesus, look him in the eye and say thank you. He’s not moving, in spite of his friends trying to get him to walk on, with Jairus looking more and more anxious. Jesus must think this is important. Perhaps it is. Perhaps I have to complete the circle and face my past and my future full on. Perhaps there’s more at stake here than simply fixing the mess of my menstrual cycle.*

*All right. Here I go.*

*I step forward, head up, eyes fixed on Jesus. He knows. His face is one big, warm smile. When I get close I find that somehow I’m on the ground and I’m starting to pour out my story. I can’t believe he just kneels down right alongside me in the dust. It would be embarrassing if it wasn’t so generous. He takes my hand. No-one has done that willingly for years. Touch! And he says something beautiful.*

*‘Daughter of God, you are loved, and your faith is lovely to see. It’s made you well; do you know that? So now you can go in peace. You’re healed. You’re safe in God’s hands.’ It’s something like that, anyway. I just know I’m overwhelmed a second time. I feel completely assured of God’s love for me and that I’m safe. Is this what they mean by salvation?*

*It’s all too much to take in. With a last conspiratorial smile, he gets up and walks on with an agitated Jairus beside him. But he leaves behind one amazed and grateful woman.*

*I’m so glad he asked who touched him.*

Thus the story.

One of the most poignant lessons we’ve learned from Covid is how important touch is. We knew it in theory. A baby needs to be touched and held, needs the reassuring warmth of a mother’s skin. The gentle touch of a loved one is sweet ecstasy to a young couple. When somebody has been bereaved one of the most acute deprivations is that of touch. And in the pandemic one of the most painful losses has been not being able to touch loved ones, particularly in hospitals and care homes. And the restorative hugs of my children and grandchildren after a year of deprivation was balm, beauty and joy.

The theologian David Ford once visited a L’Arche community where people with and without learning disabilities live and work together, and he wrote this: ‘Touching is basic. It flows through the day – dressing, eating, carrying, hair-care, bathing, playing, and just literally keeping in touch. Above all what struck me was its gentleness. The violence of our times is horrendous – physical violence, verbal violence, economic violence, institutional violence, spiritual violence. It is intensified by being vividly presented in the media, so that violence dominates imaginations as well as behaviour. Yet here in this place was a practice of touching, of handling people, which seemed like a prophetic sign of an alternative. It had enabled gentleness to be at the heart of community.’

Never again will we take touch for granted. That woman with the haemorrhage was transformed by touch. She reached out. She touched Jesus. Her life was changed.

The same can be true for us. Reach out. Jesus is just a prayer away.