

MARK 1:35-45
HEALING TOUCH!

Have you ever watched someone cross street to avoid you? It may be done very subtly as the person tried to disguise it; maybe it was totally unsubtle! You've seen someone you know, whom you might even consider to be a friend and when they spot you, they dive across the street to walk past on the other pavement. How did that feel? It is horrible, isn't it? It has happened to me at least once and there have been other times I've seemed to be the invisible man as people I know walk past, seeming not to see me as I've been about to talk to them; I have been stunned by that, left speechless. A friend of mine - his daughter was killed in a road traffic accident when she was a student in Edinburgh, though they didn't live here, they lived in Caithness. It was a horrible experience for them as you can perhaps imagine; I was speaking to him one day a good while after the event and asked him if anything had taken him by surprise during all of that time; he told me of his sadness and his disappointment when Christians that he knew crossed the street to avoid him. It was nothing compared to the hurt he felt at the death of his daughter, but it made it all just that bit worse.

The picture on the screen is one of a set of images that were famous in 1989-ish. Princess Diana met patients who were suffering with the HIV/Aids virus and she opened a treatment centre in London; she made the point of not only meeting people suffering with this virus, but she made the point of touching them, shaking their hands, hugging the children. This took place at a time when people didn't understand as much about HIV as we do now and there was a huge stigma attached to the disease and people would cross the street to avoid people who were suffering in this way, and they most certainly would not touch them. She made a very public attempt to break that stigma.

There is a man in our story today who knows exactly how it feels for people to cross the street to avoid him. He has leprosy. This starts off as a skin disease, but then attacks other parts of body. The culture of the time pushed people with leprosy to the margins; there is a long list of instructions and people with leprosy were seen as 'unclean' and because they were unclean "*He must...*" (*Leviticus 13:46*) Israel was a long time away from living in camps, but the man must live outside his village, his town; he must stay away from everyone else because they were afraid that they might catch this disease and become ill and unclean. When he came into the town or the village, he had to warn people he was coming and call out "Unclean! Unclean!" The regulations put it on to the priest to diagnose leprosy in the first place; the priest would have declared this man unclean at some stage in the past; only the priest could declare him healed and clean again later. In the meantime, all contact with everyone was forbidden except with other people suffering from leprosy; there would be no work, no family, no conversation and certainly no touch.

How does that feel? This is not about how does the disease feel; there would be a certain amount of pain involved. No, I mean how does it feel when people cross the street to avoid you? There are all kinds of answers to that question and these answers are all about our emotions. Here is a man who, every time he walks down the street, is reminded that he is diseased; people's faces tell him that he is an outcast; their body language and their behaviour tell him that he is an outcast, that he is despised by his fellow human beings, by the people he grew up with, by the people he perhaps knows well. He is unloved and he is made to feel unloved. He doesn't belong any more; he lives outside the camp, probably in caves or hills with other people who share his disease. He has such a low opinion of himself, his life is at rock bottom, because people have told him over and over again that he is rubbish. What

is he to do? Then he hears that Jesus has come to his town; will that be his salvation?

Mark tells us the whole story in 3 verses: *"A man..." (Mark 1:40f)* It feels as if the man has prepared his speech: it is not a long speech, but it seems that he has rehearsed it well for Jesus. He is on his knees; there is a sense of 'this is my last chance; if Jesus can't, more won't, heal me, then there is no chance for me anywhere else.' He comes to Jesus and says 2 things; let's turn them round. The second thing is a profession of faith: *"You can..." (Mark 1:40)* He knows that Jesus is able to help him; he has heard of other miracles that Jesus has done to heal people, Jesus has become famous in that part of Galilee for His healing ministry. So the man comes believing that Jesus is certainly able to help him in his dire sense of need. Maybe we share that with him: we believe that Jesus is able to help us, that He is able to answer our prayers; we have doubts maybe, questions, but they are so often not about Jesus' ability to help, to save, to answer us; we believe that He is able to save us completely or answer our prayers; our questions, our doubts lie with the other part of our man's speech. *"You can..." (Mark 1:40)*

Before he declares his faith, there is a doubt, a question: *"If you..." (Mark 1:40)* Now, we say, surely he knows that Jesus is willing. If Jesus is known for anything it is for His compassion! We'll get there. But remember where our man is coming from; he is coming from a place where everyone tells him he is rubbish, a place where nobody, but nobody will give him anything. Will anyone help him? No! Will anyone hug him? Certainly not! Will anyone give him the time of day? Never! So he comes with all of that in his bag, everyone telling him he is rubbish, everyone crossing the street to avoid him. Why should Jesus be any different? So *"If you..." (Mark 1:40)* "Will you do for me, Jesus, what nobody else has done and treat me as a real person?" What kind of expectation does he have of Jesus?

"Filled with ..." (Mark 1:41f) Compassion – Jesus feels the man's pain; He does what no-one else in the town has done, He treats him as a human being and feels the pain that he has in his life. There is physical pain from the disease; there is emotional and spiritual pain from being an outcast; Jesus feels all of that; it is what compassion means. Then *"Jesus reached..." (Mark 1:41)* How dare Jesus touch an untouchable? All the taboos are being broken here by Jesus; this is radical stuff from Jesus; He does what no-one else would have dared to do and He touches a man with leprosy; there is something symbolic about this healing touch. As if it is not already clear, Jesus puts all of this into words: *"I am willing... be clean!" (Mark 1:41)* His body language has already expressed that compassion by His touch, but now His words make it crystal clear and Jesus is not only able to heal this man, but He is also willing to heal him and He does. Compassion, touch, being willing: the man's life is turned around!

"Jesus..." (Mark 1:43) It is not just enough for man to be healed; the healing needed to be verified for him to be able to take his place again in normal society. Jesus sent him to the priest and the priest would give him a certificate to tell the world that this man no longer has leprosy, but is now clean again. That changed his life completely. He could live in the town again and not outside in the caves anymore; he could take up with his family again and with all kinds of other normal social relationships, since he was no longer a social outcast; he could work again and use his skills, and earn his living. Everything that had been denied to him by his leprosy was open to him again; his life was completely changed. How happy he must have been. Indeed when Jesus told him not to tell anyone else, couldn't do it! He had to tell! It's not really surprising!

Leprosy is not your issue, I'm sure. But there are other things that make us anxious, or afraid, that rob us of our peace or our self-esteem, even create times when people cross the street to avoid us. It will be different for everyone of us. As I said earlier, our questions are not often about Jesus' ability to save us; we are convinced that He is able. Our questions and doubts might be over His willingness to save and to help and to answer my prayers. Some people have been told all their lives that they are rubbish: there are all kinds of people who look fine on outside, but inside they have such a low view of themselves because people have crossed the street to avoid them or people have told them that they are rubbish. Why should we think that Jesus will be any different from the rest? Why should Jesus not simply add to that chorus and when we pray, will He not turn round and say "You are rubbish; I won't help"? All the gospel evidence shows us exactly the opposite; all the gospel evidence shows us Jesus as the man of compassion, who knows our pain, who understands our pain and who is able and more, who is willing to help us. He loves us; He cares for us; He will love us and never stop loving us! That's what we see of Jesus here, One who will love and care for us, no matter who we are and what bothers us. He is able, yes; but more today, He is willing, He is full of compassion!

Here's another piece of this picture: how do we learn not to cross the street to avoid people we don't want to meet? Jesus has to be our role model for Christian behaviour as well as the One who answers our prayers. The disciples have to learn to be like the Master. Go back to my friend in Caithness: it was Christian people who crossed the street to avoid him! We'd expect Christian people to understand compassion because we are touched by Jesus' compassion, but no – some crossed street to avoid him, not everyone, but enough for him to notice. It is easy for us to criticise people for their lack of faith or their lack of commitment to Jesus and the Church, but how much do we understand of their life? Have we walked in their shoes for a week of their life? Have we the spirit of compassion that listens to one another, that cares for one another, that is willing to listen and spend time with people we don't know or whose lives are broken? If any group of people should be full of compassion for the needs of the world, if any group of people should be willing to break down the cultural taboos for social outcasts, it should be Christians; it should be the disciples of Jesus. We should walk where Jesus walked.

If you know how it feels to see someone cross the road to avoid you, you will have a sense of how this man with leprosy felt. You will understand his question – "will Jesus just be like all others?" You will share his delight when he discovered that Jesus is different; Jesus is full of compassion; Jesus is not only able to heal, but is willing, touching, healing. What is it that is broken about you? How do you pray for Jesus to help and heal you? You know He can, but your question is "Will He listen to me?" Here is Jesus full of compassion for us and for what has left us broken; come to Him and hear Him say "*I am willing*". If you know how it feels to see someone cross road to avoid you, learn and let that not be you; have compassion for others; break down the taboos; change way we think, one action at a time; care for those in need. "*If you...I am willing... Be clean*" (Mark 1:40f)