

How Touching!

Acts 4³²⁻³⁵; Psalm 133; 1 John 1¹⁻²; John 20^{19-end}

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. [1 John 1¹]

The difficulty some have with the whole business of faith is that it is so intangible – you can't touch it! If only there was more certainty, something more solid.

Certainly, that seems to have been the case for Thomas who (echoing what many think) says, **Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.** Given the opportunity, he declines but still believes: **My Lord and my God.**

Perhaps that is why, as John opens his Epistle, he mentions the senses of hearing and seeing and touch: these were the tangible proof that they had known Jesus in life as they now knew him after the resurrection.

However, the tangibility of faith may yet be known today:

✘ **The Willingness to Forgive:**

Most of us are quite happy to receive forgiveness. We can cope with what the Epistle says: **if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** We like the fact that our failure is already accommodated: **if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins** and we can even, magnanimously, accept that the text goes on to say, **and not only for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.**

The feeling of relief when we know ourselves to be forgiven is in itself tangible and liberating

We may even rejoice in the power that is given to us when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into us – **if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.** Again, that feeling of being absolved by those we have offended is also tangible and liberating.

One of the hardest truths is that forgiveness must be reciprocal to be effective.

We will pray, **forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others**, and that is tangible because it is much more than a feeling: it is an action.

✘ **The Preparedness to Share:**

This, too, is more action than feeling. The Christian faith goes much further than the Judaism out of which it grew. The Psalmist expresses that great feeling of being together: **behold how good and pleasant it is to dwell in unity**, although as someone with a beard I am not certain about how positive the next bit is – **it is like precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard.** I am glad that anointing for the Priesthood is less liberal today! The Christian expression of togetherness is much more tangible – and costly! **No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.** This isn't asking for financial irresponsibility – the research around the National Lottery shows that (70% of people who win a substantial sum have lost it in 2 years) – which is why the joint resource of the people of faith **was distributed to each as any had need.**

Perhaps a harder truth than the need to share forgiveness is that we need to share what we have: a greedy Christian is a contradiction – our God doesn't have an 'L' in the middle!

Our Easter faith touches every part of our lives – today, our relationships, characterised by forgiveness and our wealth, which is no longer mine but ours. Forgiveness only works when it is shared and possessions are only beneficial when they are shared. When Christians live like this then there is tangible evidence that what we say we believe is real enough to change our attitude to God, to others and ourselves.

Permit me to repeat a story I have told before:

A peasant farmer wanted to impress his neighbours with his generosity. He declared, 'If I had two houses, I would only keep the one I needed and give the other to someone who needed it.' Impressed with the positive reaction, he continued, 'If I had two fields, I would only keep the one I needed and give the other to someone who needed it.' Someone from the crowd shouted, 'What if you had two cows?' He replied, 'I would only keep the one I needed and give the other to someone who needed it.' 'What about two goats?' came another voice. 'I would keep the goat I needed and give the other to someone who needed it.' 'What about two chickens?' Silence. The voice persisted, 'What about two chickens?' Rather subdued the man replied, 'Ah! That is different! You see, I have two chickens!'