

## Epiphany 4

I take as my text today from the Gospel of Matthew:

And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

There is something very remarkable in today’s Gospel passage from St. Matthew; it is not just the healing of the leper or the healing of the centurion’s servant; rather, it is quite simple, something we wouldn’t even think about today — Jesus reached out His hand and touched the leper.

What is so extraordinary about that simple action? Perhaps, indeed, in this new age of digital communication where the virtual seems to trump reality, we can ask ourselves that question in this era just as well as in ancient times: what is so extraordinary about reaching out and touching someone?

Let’s put this in a better perspective.

As Jesus came down from the mountain, accompanied by a large throng of followers, He was approached by a leper who pleaded with our Lord to make him clean.

A leper approaching another Jew: quite unheard of in that time, even that a leper would approach anyone was quite unheard of until a few decades or so ago.

Then, until recent times, a leper was little more than the living dead. He was ostracized, cast out of society, abandoned by family and friends, and forbidden to come near anyone. He was condemned to a living death as punishment for his sins. That’s what the Jews thought. The disease was punishment for sin.

Until recent years, leprosy was a very misunderstood disease, a horrible disease that ended in a painful death.

The body would be covered with lesions or sores. The person would become disfigured. In early times, it was thought that limbs would fall off because of injuries resulting from lack of feeling. Thus, in ancient time, it appeared as if the person died inch by inch and, for some, the disease could last as long as 20 to 30 years.

That it is contagious is without doubt but as we know today it is spread primarily through nasal droplets, and, importantly, only in recent years has it become treatable with antibiotics.

Now, in ancient times, lepers were treated as if they were in effect dead men and were required to cover their mouths and cry out as they went about, “unclean, unclean.” Rabbis were known to throw stones at them if they approached. Coming into contact with a leper was second only in defilement to coming into contact with a dead body.

During the middle ages, if a person contracted leprosy, he was brought into the church where the priest donned a stole and read the burial service over him. As far as everyone was concerned, the person was already dead.

It wasn't just the outward appearance of the disease. Leprosy was thought to be so contagious, even to the point that if a person got too close, the disease would be transmitted just by proximity; even the shadow of a leper was thought to have dire effects.

With this as the background, we have the scene set with Jesus being approached by the leper. Rather than turn away, even run away, Jesus allowed the man to approach, come close to Him.

And then, Jesus did something extraordinary. He reached out His hand and touched the leper.

Imagine the gasp that must have come from the crowd of followers. Even His disciples must have been taken aback by this reckless action.

And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him....

Going against convention; risking everything; yet He was bringing change into the world.

Isn't that why Jesus came into the world? to bring change, a change of heart and a new way of life; to bring us into a new relationship with God, to redeem us from sin and to give us the hope of eternal life in His Heavenly Kingdom?

He did this first by reaching out and touching people: touching them physically and spiritually. The Gospel passage from Matthew today gives a perfect example: Jesus reaching out and touching a leper; literally touching him. Unheard of in Biblical times: one simply did not touch an unclean person. The story of the "Good Samaritan" also emphasizes this point. And the story, we also heard today of the centurion, a Gentile, further illustrates the point.

Even today, there is still a reluctance to reach out and touch people and it's not just about people with possible contagious diseases. We human beings set up all kinds of barriers: social and economic barriers, educational barriers, ethnic barriers, racial barriers, gender barriers, and religious barriers; and I'm sure there are more barriers, even sub-categories of barriers.

For Jesus, there were no such barriers.

Now, some may think that because Jesus was divine, He could touch whoever He pleased and He would not catch their disease.

Perhaps, but that is not the real point of what He did in touching the lepers, the poor, the infirm, the dead. Jesus broke down barriers and He did this by demonstrating that love was the focal point of God's relationship with humankind and that it should be the focal point of humankind's relationship with one another.

The risk Jesus took was more than physical; He was taking on the “system.” By the simple act of touching someone considered unclean, Jesus presented Himself as a revolutionary, going against centuries of tradition and confronting Jewish Law.

As He set about changing the world for all time, Jesus also demonstrated His complete authority over nature: he commanded the wind and sea to be calm; He changed water into wine; and He healed the sick. His authority extended even over life and death, raising the dead and finally overcoming death Himself.

Our Lord continues to reach out to us and touch us. In His Body and Blood that we receive at the Altar, He touches us and feeds us with His very Life.

Through the Sacraments of the Church, Jesus touches us: when we are baptized; when we are confirmed; when we are anointed with the Holy Oils or sprinkled with Holy Water; in life and in death, Jesus touches us.

What more could we do in response to that touch than to touch others as well? touch their lives, make a difference; show the world what revolutionaries we Anglicans are.

There are no barriers in Jesus Christ; there is only love, hope, and life. Likewise, there should be no barriers with us as we strive to emulate the source of our hope, the object of our love, and the promise of life everlasting.