

June 2012

## Touch of the Divine

*There is a raw and physical reality about a God who became human flesh*

There is no sound like the fall of the earth on the coffin. It was the funeral of the mother of a priest-friend in Ireland. He had been so strong all that November day – at the Requiem Mass and in receiving the condolences of neighbours. ‘Sorry for your trouble, Fr Dermot.’ He was staring at the grave, his face hollow with loss. It was getting dark when his friend arrived from England at the cemetery. She simply placed her arm across his shivering shoulders. Immediately he yelled something out – it sounded like ‘Why?’ – and then, as in a sudden cloud-burst, he began to sob and sob.

I have often marvelled at the power of touch. How much emotion it releases, how much healing it brings. Any parent who has finally picked up their tired, tense and fractious children will know the soothing power of holding them closely to their breast. Skin has to be touched, arms are for holding. Sr Mary told me about the boy who rushed up to her in the playground claiming to have fallen and hurt his knee. After close inspection she suggested that he had made up the story. ‘Well, Sister,’ the disgruntled pupil muttered, ‘couldn’t you give it a rub anyway?’



There is a story about the fearful child who, during the night, called out for his mother. She came into his room and searched the dark wardrobe to put his mind at rest. He



would not be consoled. She checked for lurking (small) monsters under the bed. All to no avail. She spoke to him about the protection of the angels and of the presence of God all around him. He still refused to be satisfied. Unknowingly echoing the deepest desire within all creation, he blurted out, ‘I want something with skin on.’

When fragile people stand before us, leaden-eyed and hopeless, something tells us that the first thing that Jesus would have done is to hold them tenderly. Then, like Dermot, their taut bodies would relax, their breathing change and their tears begin to flow. Every day I notice faces that ache to be touched. As people come with heavy hearts for a healing conversation or Confession, I think about the last time that the anxious edges around their mouths and eyes were traced by a loving hand, maybe never since childhood. At our ‘anointing meditations’ many people cannot remember a time when someone held their hands, or touched their feet, so gently.

We are designed to be looked at, to be held, to be enveloped with tenderness. Just as God, according to Celtic folklore, placed a healing for all human illnesses somewhere in the vast variety of creation, so, too, God has built into the miracle of our humanity – mind, body and spirit – the assuaging of the open wounds that would otherwise stay bleeding. Divinised twice, first by birth and then by baptism, our bodies are thresholds of God’s peace, embodying and setting free the invisible mystery of true compassion and hope. That is why God became flesh in the first place.



Five-year-old Mortakai hated school. Every day he would escape from his teachers and head for home. No amount of reasoning, promising or threatening made any difference. His parents were desperate. As a last resort they brought the little lad to their rabbi. After looking at Mortakai lovingly until he quietened down, the wise old rabbi picked him up and held him to his heart for a long time. Nothing was said. But something very important had happened. What words could not accomplish, a silent embrace did.



We celebrate sacraments to body forth the presence of God. There is more to God than monologue. All the sacraments are touching places. There is a depth and richness to ritual. Ritual is to our love of God what an embrace is to lovers. It can say and do what words cannot express. Bodies and sacraments go together. ‘Without body – without sacrament,’ writes the Welsh poet and artist David Jones. ‘Angels only – no sacrament. Beasts only – no sacrament.’ Without human flesh God would have remained for ever out of touch and out of reach. It would all be an angelic existence without substance, without salvation. There would be no real heart in it (1 John 1: 1-4).

Jesus lived fully in his body. He embraced young and old, placing his hands on sinners, offering no resistance to the head of John on his breast or to the sensation of Mary's hair on his naked feet. When he reached for his special friends in the most human of ways and yearned, as we all do, for intimacy, he was enfleshing and revealing the true nature of God incarnate. And for children, to be lifted up on to the back, or shoulders, or hips of Jesus was to be playing with God; to be hugged and kissed by him was to be hugged and kissed by God. The tempo of his heart was always in time and tune with the divine rhythm. Incredibly, it is the same with us (John 14:12). Incarnation reveals that the many expressions of human love are pulsing with God's love too.



'Our love is the work of God within the human heart.' As Pope Benedict expresses so clearly in *Deus Caritas Est*, human love is brought to completion in the love of God. And it can never be truly incarnated into our lives without rejoicing in the essential sacredness of the human heart in the human body. In his life, death and resurrection Jesus went far beyond words. So did God in creating humanity. And so does the Eucharist, when we actually eat the flesh of God and drink God's blood.

To be writing this reflection between the feasts of the Flesh and Blood of the Son of Man, Corpus Christi celebrated on Thursday this week, and the Sacred Heart of the Human One, to be celebrated next Friday, is a great joy. Both celebrations, so physical, so intimate, so universal and so incarnational, are given to us to remind us of these wonderful truths. At Mass, the body of the man Jesus is transformed into our bodies, and ours into his. We feel the flow of his wine-blood within, merging with our very being at a profound level of mutual surrender and transformation. The divine heartbeat becomes the energy that pulses in ours. Next Friday is the feast of all our sacred, human hearts.

Those precious moments after Holy Communion are marvellous in their sensibility. They have an immediate sensuousness and an experiential truth that can take our breath away. In one of his weekly homilies Pope John Paul II described our need of God in the Eucharist 'as physical as the need for food or water'; our desire for intimacy with God as 'instinctive and physical'. It is not by chance, he said, that the psalmist spoke of 'an embrace, of a clinging that is almost physical'. The Eucharist is God with skin on; it is God's hug.

Like Mortakai and his rabbi, God picks us up and holds us closely until we stop crying and our restless hearts find peace again.

