

THE PARISH OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST, BROUGHTON

Touch by Canon Andrea Titterington

Do you remember when it was normal to shake hands? It seems a long time ago. It feels so very awkward not to be able to use this once-common gesture. Bumping elbows is not the same at all. Instead of the desire to show friendliness and welcome, we are now to fear contamination from a hand shake. And the fear of invasion of personal space has become entrenched in the guidance to stay 1 or 2 metres apart. Even walking down a street may mean crossing the road or making a wide detour to avoid fellow pedestrians. Is this the new normal?

Touch is important in human interaction. One of the most difficult outcomes of the many lockdowns experienced in the past couple of years was the inability to hug relatives and friends – even to hold the hands of ill and dying loved ones. The loss of that close contact was painful. Yet many lonely people are starved of human touch from week to week, year to year.

Years ago an experiment was undertaken in two hospital wards to see if the kind of interaction experienced by patients made any difference to their recovery. In one ward consultants spent one-on-one time with patients, sitting on their beds (now impossible), holding their hands and showing interest in more than the charts hanging on the bedstead. In another ward, the patients were treated well, but with little personal interaction from consultants other than terse prescriptions and descriptions. The findings were demonstrable. Those in the ward which had more personal treatment recovered sooner and had better healing outcomes.

In a church context healing comes in different ways. Sharing in worship, especially Holy Communion, fellowship through conversation and, when appropriate, physical contact. Much of Jesus Christ's healing was through touch. And healing is central to Christ's ministry.

For us touch can emphasize our understanding and support. We listen and look closely at a person,

not distracted by other things. It is how we have been able show our love for one another.

One of my favourite hymns was composed by Richard Gillard in 1977. It captures what Paul wrote in Chapter 6 of the Epistle to the Galatians:

*Brother, sister let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.*

*I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.*

*When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.*

*Brother, sister let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.*

Hopefully a time will come when we can again shake hands and share the peace and join in Holy Communion at the altar rail with a common cup. Until then our concern for others necessitates distance. May we continue to extend our caring fellowship despite the constraints.