

Sunday.13

Isn't it interesting how manners change with time. What is considered proper and acceptable at one time becomes gauche and out of date at another. Of course manners vary not only with the passage of time but also with a change of place. What is proper and acceptable in the USA may not be such in Europe or Africa. Time and place really determine manners.

Today's Gospel made me think of this fact. Here we see how people in Jesus' time and place reacted to each other, and what strikes me in this Gospel scene is its tactility. A rather rare word. It is more familiar to us in its adjectival form, tactile. Something is tactile if it can be perceived by the sense of touch. Even more informally, we could speak of this scene's tangible quality. There is a whole lot of touching which goes on in it. For example, Jairus falls at Jesus' feet. How close did he get to the Lord's feet? Did he embrace them or kiss them? At the very least he is close enough to do so. And what does he request of the Lord? "Please," he says, "come lay your hands on my daughter that she may get well and live."

Then the woman in the crowd suffering with hemorrhages for twelve years tells herself, “If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured.” And it happens. She comes up behind him and touches his cloak and immediately she feels the flow of blood in her body dry up. And just as immediately he feels power going out of his body and turns around and asks, “Who touched my clothes?”

When they finally arrive at Jairus’ house, Jesus takes Jairus and his wife with him into the room where their child lay. Then he takes the girl by the hand and tells her to get up: “Talitha koum,” which means, the Gospel writer informs us, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” And she does. And the scene concludes with the Lord’s careful command that she be given something to eat.

This scene is not the only one in the Gospels which stresses the sense of touch. Jesus is, we might say, a “hands on” person. He touches people. Indeed, sometimes in his tactility he goes beyond what we consider acceptable. For instance he spits on his hands and then uses his spittle to rub the eyes of a blind man. There is an action in the baptismal liturgy reminiscent of this action. The person baptizing touches the ears and the mouth of the person being baptized and says, “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word

and your mouth to proclaim his faith.” While saying this, the one baptizing is supposed to touch the person’s ears and mouth. I think some of us are quite willing to touch the person’s ears. But his mouth? Maybe with a baby. But with an adult? Maybe this action is not prescribed in the baptism of adults. But given what we have in the Gospels, it seems as though the Lord would have had no problem in doing that.

What does this emphasis on touching in this Gospel scene and in so many others teach us? It teaches us that God loves us and is willing to get close to us. Touching entails closeness. Sometimes physical closeness is friendly and loving, but at other times it is hostile and deadly. We can’t harm or kill someone without getting close to him or her, unless we have a long-range gun. In all other cases we get close with an instrument of destruction or with our bare hands. Can you imagine what people in Rwanda experienced when those who wanted to kill them came for them during the 1994 genocide there? The killers had to come close with their spears or sticks or machetes, and those to be killed could see that they were sometimes their neighbors, even their former friends

This much is clear. Our faith is tactile in its very roots, for we preach a God who has become human, and so touchable, in Jesus of Nazareth. The word we use to describe this action is incarnation, which means born in the flesh. The word carnal can often bring up thoughts of sin: temptations to impure actions which of course take place in the flesh, in the body. Despite this immediate association of what is sinful with this word, we ought to hold on to its more positive meaning found in the word incarnation, God's becoming carnal, God's becoming flesh, God's becoming human and touchable, Jesus the human being, Jesus the man, Jesus who was born and died in the flesh. Without this flesh there is no Christianity. Without this body there is no redemption. Without this carnality there is no church and no eucharist. There is an idea, but there is no fact.

No wonder then that our Christian faith is a history of facts. Christians create hospitals. Christians care for the sick and the dying. Christians visit the imprisoned. For in all these cases they are taking care of the carnal, the bodily, needs of their sisters and brothers. Hence the immediate response to this present crisis in which children are removed from the arms of their parents and put

in prison-like environments where the touching will be rare or hostile, where there will be few loving touches.

May the Lord of Jairus' story help us to be for these children what the Lord Jesus was for Jairus: entering his house and taking his daughter by the hand and telling her to get up, and then telling those present to feed her.