

*May our hearts may be opened to God's word even as we ask that
God's word may be opened to our hearts*

Touching wounds

When I was seven my Great Uncle Bill showed me his false leg. I'd known that Great Uncle Bill had one, but I'd never seen it because it was hidden under his clothes. One day he just lifted up his trouser leg and there it was. He tapped it and it made a funny, tinny sound which I still remember. And he told me to touch it, so I could see that it was real and what it felt like, but I shied away and he laughed, good naturedly. Nowadays a lost limb is not an embarrassment, not something that needs to be hidden. But we have done more than that. Heeding the call of wisdom we have made one of those leaps of faith and knowledge asked of us in our earlier reading from Proverbs 8 and we now have the technology to design replacement limbs that function perfectly and can even more efficient than the ones they have replaced. Anyone who has watched athletes at the Paralympics will appreciate how amazing these new creations are. They are admired for their own inherent beauty. They have been freed, out of their closet, to become what they need to be and allowed to do what they do best, without having to stay hidden or made to fit in with any expected norm.

Today we are reflecting on inclusion and the gay and lesbian experience. Not for the first time in my life have I felt the urge to protest "why me?" "Will I never get away from the stereotype?" Well, why not me? The human sexuality issue has been an integral part of my Christian experience from my mid teens. It often feels like a "Pauline thorn" – the one Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 20 as the one which stops him from boasting about himself and keeps his focus on his journey with Jesus. At times you may feel that my sharing at City has been something of a Pauline thorn to you. I first came here 27 years ago, fresh from University, wondering if City URC could be my new home. At University I had finally declared to my Christian friends that I was gay and what's more God was ok about it. I took quite a battering. It is very hard when former friends suddenly turn sadly away when they see you walking towards them. I wasn't sure I wanted to go through that

rejection again.

After a decade here at City of tentatively probing, making some good, informal progress but largely skirting round the issue I drifted away. I had by then formed a relationship with the man who has now been my spouse for almost twenty years. It's very hard to be in a sharing community when you feel that something as important as the other half of your life can't be easily mentioned. It's just not authentic. A bit like Great Uncle Bill's urge at long last to show me his false leg, I guess. And when we say things like "we are a church family" and yet – and yet you know you can't, just daren't say something that you need to, then it doesn't quite ring true. The late eighties and nineties was the time, too, of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Coming to terms with a personal response to the issue while friends and lovers are withering and dying around you was suddenly more real and relevant than being here on a Sunday, but it was a nightmare. The community had little support from outside. We counselled each other, we watched each other get ill without hope of recovery and we held each others' hands as we died. Surviving partners were often unacknowledged or even excluded at funeral services as the biological family of the deceased took centre stage. Rarely was the cause of death mentioned, ignoring the grief and the needs of those trying to terms with the loss. This was my introduction to the world of being asked to and leading meaningful funeral services. None of this experience I felt able to share in any real way here – we simply didn't have the framework, the vocabulary, the means to build the necessary bridges.

Well as many of you will know when I came back regularly to City URC we began the risky and, at times, difficult for all, business of doing just that. The two real landmarks were the "open and affirming policy" of 2003 and the decision in 2005, to offer blessings to same sex couples. My spouse and I were privileged to be the first couple to bring our families and friends to share with you our day in 2006. We had been together for 17 years. For me that day was THE sign of unconditional love from this church – faith made action. I finally felt accepted in my Christian home.

Our gospel reading this morning; the story of the Doubting Thomas is well known. It appears only in John's gospel. Matthew's gospel concludes with the story of the resurrected Christ on the mountain top, sending his followers out into the world. Mark's gospel appears to have ended abruptly with the women running from the empty tomb but now has alternative endings, including one where Jesus meets his disciples round a table. Luke's main post resurrection story is the road to Emmaus. Today is inclusive Sunday so let us first acknowledge the inclusiveness of our theology. Like our playful time looking at the inclusive nature of words earlier in our worship we do not have to decide whether one resurrection account is truer than any other. We can hold them all together and accept them as different sides to a wider picture. And we can also say that there are many ways to understand these stories and why should one way be truer than another? Some of us will say that the stories are literally true. Others will say that they are vessels of a deeper truth than just literalness. Other still will say that we are well beyond literal representation here and that we are being invited to engage hearts and minds with a more challenging, timeless wisdom.

John's Gospel is traditionally seen as the gospel for mystics but my bible introduction tells me that in fact it is also known as the "fleshy gospel" of social concern. The fleshiness and physicality is apparent in the vivid story of Thomas' experience as he is invited to touch and even put his hand inside Jesus' wounds. Let's not miss the importance of this. Why, after all that Jesus has gone through, would he now invite someone who doubts him to touch his wounds? What is going on here?

Doctors and nurses face this dilemma all the time if they are to diagnose, treat and ultimately heal. Like them, have you ever asked a child "Where does it hurt?" and then tentatively, reluctantly pressing with a finger, "Here?" "Here?" "Yes! There!" And then, because of the pain, you know.

Sharing and causing pain is often a necessary part of the healing process. Some of you will recall Norman Preston our previous church administrator saying that the Christian community is like a

family of hedgehogs. The closer we come together the more our prickles stick into each other. I have felt those prickles in my wounds and scars over the last three decades as we have drawn closer together and I'm sure you have too. But unless we risk this, how will we know and understand one another and ultimately allow healing to happen? This is the dilemma. This is, on a grander scale, of course, the logic behind the truth and reconciliation process promoted by Desmond Tutu in South Africa following the collapse of apartheid. Acknowledge the reality of the wound, let it have its say, understand and then, transformed, we can move on together. I imagine Jesus saying this same thing to Thomas. Acknowledge the reality of the wound, let it have its say, understand and then, transformed, we can move on together.

What specifically am I talking about when I think of the wounds around human sexuality? At a networking weekend of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in London a few years ago I was chatting with an organist, a gay man in his seventies, about the wave of equality legislation which was then going through parliament. "Do you know," he said, "that for half of my life I have been labelled a criminal and for the other half, who I am has either been condemned or else not been taken seriously. As a result I have lived a lie, kept my real self a secret. All these changes have come too late for me." We need to remember that Gays and Lesbians have rarely been openly welcomed into places of worship. With such feelings of loss, sadness, regret and anger, and against the background of a hostile church history, why would anyone want to bother coming into a church, take the risk of coming to church and having those wounds re-opened, unless they absolutely felt they needed to? Are we, as Doubting Thomases, ready to be open enough to acknowledge, and where invited, to touch these wounds and be part of the healing process?

But this is a two-sided wounding, for church itself, by its own admission is flawed, broken, in need of renewal. What wounds and scars does church itself need to offer up for touching and healing? First and foremost its reluctance and at times its refusal to admit this is a problem that needs addressing. Some of you have said to

me over the years “we would never have talked about this in my youth” and “these are words I would never have used in this place”. What is missing from those two sentences is “dared” or “been allowed”. And yet do we not believe that perfect love drives out all fear? Do we not say that the truth will set us free? Secondly a church which will not acknowledge and accept inclusive sexuality yet relies on members of the gay and lesbian community for its ministry (and we have always been knowingly here, even in the highest offices) is not having the courage to acknowledge its own hypocrisy. And if it is not mature enough to do that then why should it merit the respect of society around it? As in any potential relationship, anyone coming new to our community will have these unspoken questions: how far will this place expect to mould me as we begin to share; will that mean we will all end up with a false leg like my great uncle Bill: and how far will this place go in acknowledging its own wounds and the need to change and will it risk inviting doubting hands all the way into its own side, to find its own healing and transformation, through authentic sharing?

We have come a long way here at City. In the eighties, when I was settling into this community, much of what I have said here today would have been unthinkable. It is testimony to the courage, faith and vision of our community that we have achieved this level of transformation, of renewal, of healing. As hedgehogs in a closer huddle perhaps the prickles don't hurt so much as in the beginning. And we have done all this without theological or theoretical debate and argument. The theological journey must be undertaken eventually, of course, as a dialogue rather than a debate I hope, but perhaps now when we do it we can explore from a new, wider perspective, and with the benefit of our own shared experience of the past years. It will make our journey more authentic and, in a sense, it has already begun.

Although it is our given theme for today, inclusive church is not, of course, just about human sexuality. Some years back I was privileged one morning in the refectory, to hear Sharon Geisel telling the story of her family's flight from Zimbabwe. Her sharing of that wound changed forever my understanding of the plight of the

refugee. A new Pauline thorn manifested itself before me last Sunday when Annie Morgan said to me “I hope you are going to mention our animal friends next week.” Animal welfare and the environment have only recently come more to the forefront of Christianity, which has traditionally been fettered by a narrower, human-centred vision. It was this which coloured the church’s great hostility to scientific advancement. The big problem with Galileo was that the church felt he was undermining the conviction that Man (as opposed to humankind) had to be physically at the centre of creation and so earth was the middle and the sun HAD to go around the earth. Well we got over our disappointment. But it was only in 1992 that the Vatican officially admitted that the church erred in condemning Galileo’s work.

There are, my friends, other signs of growth, signs of the deepening of vision and understanding that we as a church are here to serve and in that service, in that opening to each other prickles and wounds we ourselves gain greater understanding. And the work is unending. One small point that has been on my mind lately. We hold ourselves out as inclusive, open our communion table to whoever wishes to share, yet there are at least two members of our congregation who are wheat intolerant so they routinely do not take the bread and are thereby excluded. Why have we never done something about this? Well I hope we do so, soon.

Taking risks as we share who we are and what is most unique about each one of us is one of the most courageous and Christ-like things we can do. How do we as individuals cope as we risk our vulnerability, open our wounds to each other? How do we as a community, struggling with coming to terms with this change, cope. Well, in the chapter of the book upon which we are basing this series of sermons (Together in Hope, edited by Adrian Walker), the author, Clare Herbert, as she tells her own story, difficult and painful though it is at times, likes to sing and dance! Her actual title to this chapter is “Singing in the Rain – the hope for inclusion” And this marvellous, modern picture of renewal and transformation suddenly leaps into the mind’s eye; Gene Kelly, absurdly, recklessly, without a care in the world, splashing about in the street, deliriously happy,

dancing and signing in rain. We expressed the same sentiment, but with our usual reserve earlier when we read Psalm 117 celebrating what God is doing. We know we must be careful what we pray for, because it might come true. When we pray for renewal and change and transformation “out there” it is so easy to forget that God starts the process “in here”, within our own hearts. For the world to change WE FIRST have to be changed. This is what we are experiencing is it not? Transformed by the spirit, lead into new things by unconditional love. That is our calling as a pilgrim people. Philippians 4.4 “Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.” So let us thank God for answering our prayers but let us not forget that the answers will challenge and strike at the very core of who we think we are. I rather like to think that my Great Uncle Bill, had he been alive, would have had one of those fancy new artificial limbs and, wearing it proudly and openly, felt the delight and freedom of performing a perfect pirouette of thanksgiving right here in front of the table.

And let us cope, together, on this journey, not only with our hedgehog prickles, but as the love we share becomes more and more unconditional, as we become more and more inclusive, also by rejoicing in renewal, and at times daring, like Gene Kelly to let the inhibitions down and be caught together at times doing something absurd and wonderful, like laughing, dancing and singing in the rain.