

TOUCHING CHRIST'S WOUNDS

25th Anniversary of Women's Priesting

'Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."'

21st December, 1992. Twenty-five years ago- a quarter of a century. How much has changed in that time. The world has changed- we now live in the post-9/11 era, with all that that means globally and locally. Society has changed- look at what has happened over the past month or so-the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the current media outrage at sexual harassment by celebrity figures. And the Church has changed- and specifically the Anglican Church. As we wandered the grounds of Closebourne, back in December 1992, preparing for our priesting, did we dare believe that, twenty-five years later, here in Australia, we would see a woman elected as Archbishop, two women as diocesan bishops, women deans and women archdeacons? Did we dare believe that, in most parishes across the diocese and throughout the country, leadership, both lay and ordained, would be cooperatively shared by women and men?

We certainly dreamed of it and we dreamed of the change that this would bring to the Anglican church- a major change in culture. We dreamed of a transformation within the church from a culture of male clerical power, where 'Father knows best', into a culture of mutuality and cooperation. We dared to dream of a Church in which we, as women, were 'no longer strangers and aliens' but instead full 'members of the household of God'. And twenty-five years later much of that dream has come true, much of the longed-for change has occurred. It is even mentioned in the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse. There Bishop Sarah MacNeill is reported as asserting that 'there has been a significant shift in the culture of the church, away from clericalism to 'a more open and transparent use of power and sharing of power between laity and clergy'¹ while Bishop Greg Thompson called the ordination of women 'a watershed moment for the diocese's having a new perspective, a new way of thinking about ministry, saying that it also broke the power of older men mentoring younger boys'.² These are big achievements that we must celebrate. They deserve big hurrahs. The presence of women in positions of leadership within the Anglican Church of Australia and within this diocese has been truly a 'watershed' event.

The Royal Commission Report, however, reminds us that we cannot rest on our laurels -that there is still a very long way to go in relation to deep culture change. The Commission's exposure of the church's failure to act and its cover-up of abuse to protect its reputation has challenged us to greater transparency and deeper honesty in our relations with one another and with God. Here, I believe, the readings for this festival of St Thomas have much to say to us. They remind us of the sort of God we worship, a God who eschews our worldly understanding of reputation, power, and prestige, and who reveals Godself to us in vulnerability, darkness, and the pain of woundedness. The prophet, Habukkuk, in the

¹ Royal Commission Report... 582.

² Ibid.

darkness of the Babylonian conquest, is reminded that the present bleak situation is not the whole reality. He is summoned to tell the people, wounded by defeat and humiliation: 'God is not absent but present with us in our waiting. What we have to do is hold on patiently and in faith for the fulfilment of the vision we've been given. Times of darkness, confusion and failure are times for deepening our faith and trust in the God who doesn't work according to human understanding.' The gospel reading expresses the same message in a different way. Here the Risen Jesus holds out his wounded hands to Thomas and says, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'

It's that summons to Thomas to touch Christ's wounds which is my focus as we look ahead to the next twenty-five years and consider the deeper change that will need to take place in our Anglican culture. It's that summons to touch Christ's wounds that, I believe, is the challenge to women and men in the church over the years ahead.

Until I looked at the gospel passage more closely I hadn't realised how surprising Jesus' words to Thomas actually are. Jesus says, 'Put your finger here and **see** my hands'. The implication is that we only truly see something or someone when we actually touch them. Jesus seems to be saying that true seeing involves touching, that we won't really see his wounds and know what those wounds actually mean unless we are willing to touch them. It follows then that true believing involves that willingness to touch, to touch Jesus' wounds in all their rawness, and to touch those same wounds in one another. Of course, I don't mean 'touch' in the sense of actual physical contact. Safe Ministry training warns against that. I mean the touch of spirit to spirit, deep connection, being close enough and sufficiently connected to another person that we can experience that person's pain and share something of its intensity. The failure to do that was the charge against the church that came out of the Royal Commission. It was the accusation that the church, as a whole, and in particular, many church leaders could not see the woundedness of abuse victims because it was preoccupied with protecting itself and its reputation, instead of being willing to touch the pain and to connect with the suffering of those victims.

Touching wounds is difficult. We shy away from it. It makes us feel uncomfortable and reminds us of our own pain. So we put up barriers to protect ourselves, especially in our western culture. We swallow analgesics to reduce physical pain; we resort to alcohol or drugs to escape emotional and spiritual pain; we turn the grief of funerals into celebration, and try to transform the finality of death into the transience of 'passing'. Touching pain, our own or other people's, is very frightening. But Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here- in the wound in my hand. Put your hand right into the hole in my side. Then you will really see and believe. Then your doubts will be dispelled.'

It seems that it's only by touching Christ's woundedness that we can deeply know the truth about God, the truth of God's passionate love for creation and for every creature. Only then can we gain some understanding of the depth of the love that was willing to give up every vestige of divine or earthly prestige and power, to be born as a vulnerable baby, to experience the frustrations and hardships of human life, to endure the ignominy and agony of a shameful, excruciating death: all so that we might truly see and touch the reality of God. The truth about

God is revealed in the vulnerability of Jesus hanging on the cross, and in the continuing woundedness of that same Jesus, risen from death.

Twenty-five years ago, we women were very conscious of our wounds. We knew the pain of being an outsider in the church, excluded for centuries from priesthood because of the difference of gender. We experienced the hurt of having our ministry devalued, of having communicants refuse to take the sacrament from our tainted hands, of having parishioners leave when we were appointed to a parish. Those wounds drew us closer to God and made us more aware of the hurts borne by other outsiders and by those who felt excluded within our parishes. Our wounds served to make us more compassionate towards others and more understanding of their pain. It was, I believe, this touching of our woundedness that contributed to the cultural change that has taken place in the church over the last quarter century. But it is easy to forget the wounds and to settle down comfortably within the current system.

Awareness of woundedness is essential to the health of the church and to our belief about God. It is my privilege as a supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education to witness that awareness coming alive for CPE students as they begin to 'touch' the wounds of patients in the hospital, of prisoners in the state's gaols, or elderly residents in aged care, enduring the loss of home, independence, mobility, memory, and even their sense of self. In touching others' wounds, we touch Christ's wounds, and we learn to see Christ in the other. In touching others' wounds we are able to come to terms with our own woundedness, and so to discover the depth of the love which accepts and welcomes us, with, and despite, all our scars and ugly deformities. It's in this way that we learn to confront and not to avoid pain.

The church in this diocese has been deeply wounded through the revelations of the Royal Commission. Bishop Peter has written of the Commission as a gift to the church. It is the gift of humble awareness of our woundedness. Shamed and disgraced in the eyes of the public, we can no longer lay claim to any authority, power or status. We have been forced to confront the ugly underbelly of our beautiful rituals and the shallowness of much of our communal life. Culture change is called for and it is my belief that such change will require a willingness on the part of bishops, clergy, and people to be vulnerable, to be open to seeing, listening to and touching one another's pain, difficulties, doubts, and discouragement, and to be open to seeing, listening to and touching the pain of our society and our world.

A church that is able to see and touch Christ's wounds in each other is a church that can confront the pain of shame, failure and scandal, and that can offer to the world a place where woundedness is welcome, where the pain of strangers and aliens is understood, where difference is valued and not despised, and where people can discover a God who shares their vulnerability and loves them in their woundedness.

We read that Thomas held back from touching Christ's wounds. Seeing the Risen Jesus was sufficient for him. I wonder, however, what deeper truth about himself and about God he may have discovered if he had dared to reach out and put his finger into the hole in Christ's hand and his hand into Christ's side. Do we dare to do that at this moment of the church's life?

We, the women who were ordained twenty-five years ago, together with our successors and the men in the church, can we put our finger into Christ's wounds, in the church and in the world, and so be instrumental in bringing about change to the church's culture? By the grace of God, who keeps us close to the risen, wounded Christ, I believe that we can.