

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

www.stmagnus.org

Scottish Charity SCO 05322/CCL No 119086

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Welcome to St Magnus Cathedral this morning. It was founded in 1137 by St Rognvald, in honour of Magnus, his uncle. The Cathedral belongs to the people of Orkney and its doors are open to all. If you are a visitor, we hope this order of service will help you feel part of our worship together.

You can find our Sunday worship here.

<https://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation/>

or on YouTube here.

<https://youtu.be/HiA6u0mMD4Q>

Join our Wednesday ZOOM meditation by signing up here.

stmagnuszoom@gmail.com

Candle Lighting and opening meditation

This flame is warm as the companionship of friends is warm.

Let us celebrate the richness and diversity of life
in the presence of God.

May we walk the way of peace; where there is hate, help us show love; when fear destroys, help us restore; be the peace we're longing for. When tears flow free, reach out in grace; when darkness comes, reflect love's light; when grief abounds, show boundless care; turn violence anywhere. May we care less to be loved than to love, to talk than to hear, to rule than lift up, to keep than let go. Teach us the ways of harmony; by pardoning we our guilt assuage; by pouring out, we're made complete; thus we find the way of peace.

Reading

Luke 12: 12-16

In one town Jesus was in, there was a person with leprosy. Seeing Jesus, the sufferer fell to the ground and implored him, "Teacher, if you are willing, you can heal me." Jesus stretched out his hand, touched the person and said, "I am willing: be cleansed." Immediately the leprosy disappeared. Jesus then gave this stern warning: "Tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make the offering for your healing that Moses prescribed, as a testimony to them." The reputation of Jesus continued to grow. Large crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to some place where he could be alone and pray.

Reflection

None of our senses has suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic as much as touch. And although this touch deprivation has perhaps been most pronounced in relation to our separation from family and friends, many of us have also felt the loss of even mundane forms of touch - forms that might even be the foundation for social relations more broadly. We used to open the doors to our workplaces, touched by a hundred other hands every day, and hold them open for someone else without giving it a second thought. We used to shake hands with strangers before we got to know them. We used to pass everyday objects to each other through our hands. No more. Even as lockdowns begin to ease unevenly, we might still bump elbows, wave instead of hug, and obsessively disinfect our hands. Touch remains something of a taboo, something that brings us closer to the risk of serious disease or death.

As many of us literally lost touch with our friends and loved ones, and stopped touching strangers, we endured an unplanned social experiment on touch aversion. Sure, some of us were relieved not to have to shake hands with colleagues, acquaintances and strangers, and might never wish to do so again. For many people, though, this fear of contamination and experience of touch-aversion felt new and is likely to continue beyond the pandemic. Could this experience of the world being out of reach, beyond our fingertips, have a corrosive effect on our social relations, even when the acute threat of COVID-19 has dissipated? There is, after all, a long history of prejudice associated with touch, its relation to disgust all the way through to the politics of discrimination.

A real fear of contamination can result in more discriminatory social behaviours

Across history, dominant social groups have exploited this sense of disgust as a means of social control against 'dangerous' others. Social practices of segregation, such as in the USA in the last century, discrimination and racism rely on tapping into this basic emotion. In India, more than 160 million people known as 'untouchables' or Dalits are stigmatised as being innately impure, less than human beings. Despite the fact that untouchability was banned in India in 1950, discrimination and hate crimes against the country's Dalits are still prevalent. It's telling that segregating a wide range of everyday, bodily activities and objects has been at the heart of such structural discrimination: drinking fountains and lunch counters, cutlery and glasses, appliances and beds. These are the same types of shared social practices that were banned beyond families or social bubbles for the best part of a year in many countries across the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such effects have already been documented during the COVID-19 pandemic. As expected, people with a higher disgust-sensitivity were more likely to engage in preventative health behaviours, such as social distancing, handwashing, cleaning and disinfecting. But at the same time, a US-based study showed that people who were especially worried about becoming infected also displayed greater xenophobia.

What if the threat of COVID-19 comes under control, but people refuse to go back to the carefree tactile habits of our pre-pandemic world?

How can we explain these findings? That sociobiological relationship between touch and disgust also helps us grasp the history of why dominant social groups have so often deployed a fear of contamination to marginalise and oppress people.

This could be a real challenge we might face in our post-pandemic world: what if the threat of COVID-19 infection comes under control, but a significant number of people refuse to go back to the carefree tactile habits of our pre-pandemic world? Many report a re-entry anxiety, 'a fear of resuming pre-pandemic ways of life, having associated people with danger'. Covid anxiety syndrome, characterised by compulsive hygiene habits and fear of public places, is now being discussed in the psychiatric literature. In less severe cases, many of us don't look forward to shaking hands again or breathing the same air as others in crowded trains or buses. According to a survey conducted in February 2021, one in four Britons stated that they did not look forward to greeting people with a handshake, a hug or a kiss. Another in July 2021, 40 per cent strongly reported avoiding touching things in public spaces because of a fear of the virus, even though the current scientific consensus suggests that airborne droplets are more likely to spread the COVID-19 virus than touch.

In a world where we are less willing to touch others, will we slowly become more

xenophobic, discriminatory and bigoted, despite our best intentions? Touching and being touched is a biological drive we share with many other animals. It's also the most basic way of connecting to and feeling each other's joys and sorrows, fears and desires. By simply not touching each other, we also lose touch with one other. Being aware of the subtle ways in which touch aversion, disgust and discrimination feed off each other should make us redouble our efforts to reach out, touch others, and let ourselves be touched in return

Prayer

At times like this, when the triumph of death seems inevitable and the suffering around us makes us want to turn away, we commit to resurrection.

In the secret chambers where power-brokers meet, we commit to making the voice of life and justice heard;

In the crisis moments when quick decisions must be made that hold human lives in the balance we commit to making peace and co-existence the challenge we raise;

In the forgotten corners where the powerless and poor daily walk the valley of the shadow of death, we commit to equity, compassion and giving;

In the dying places on our planet where human carelessness and consumption have threatened the survival of all we commit to simplicity and sustainability

As Jesus stands among us now, may we know the power of life; may we turn away from death; And may we become agents of resurrection, where ever we find ourselves

Blessing

This season closes. Another begins with its own journey,
leading to a cross, and through that cross to new life.

But there is much we must encounter before we reach that empty tomb.
We take these hopes, birthed in the memory of the firm voice proclaiming that,
wherever we are, we are in the presence of the Christ.

May you stay safe in the Way of Christ, and may you be blessed by his Spirit
this day and always.