1 July 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Wisdom 1: 13–15, 2: 23–24; 2 Corinthians 8: 7–end; Mark 5: 21–43
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‘God’s Touch’

I’m preoccupied at the moment with androids and agents with artificial intelligence; mainly because this week I have to give a paper at a conference on transhumanism. What is transhumanism? Well, in brief, it’s the belief that since human beings are evolved creatures then there is no reason to think further evolution is not possible. So, through advances in science and technology, not you and I, but maybe generations yet to come, will transcend our current mental and physical limitations. There will be greater, greater enhancements – of our strength, say, or our intelligence. We will live even longer and, maybe with implants or smart enriching drugs, we will have improved memories, skin and muscles tones that don’t come from visiting the gym, learn languages in a few hours etc. And I keep thinking, in my preoccupation, of Dr. Spock. Dr. Spock in the first series of films based on Star Trek. There’s one film in particular, The First Contact, and a scene within that film that I keep returning to. Data, an android, has been captured humanity’s deadliest enemy, the Borg. He lies on an operating table and is approached by the Borg queen who defines herself in Biblical terms: “I am the beginning, the end. The one who is many.” She who turns chaos into order. “And you are in chaos,” she tells Data. Data’s conflict is that he’s an AI machine who dreams of being human. To win him over, and assimilate him into the Borg the queen reactivates his “emotion chip” and grafts a piece of human flesh onto the synthetic envelop of his engineered arm. Then lightly she breathes across the skin causing the hair follicles to rise and the flesh to pimple. Data gasps with delight and the queen seductively asks: “Is that good for you?”

Now this may not be promising material for a Sunday sermon, but in a state of being preoccupied it’s what’s been circulating madly through the neural channels of my all too human brain. And it’s probably why in reading the lessons for this morning I was struck in Mark’s Gospel, in the account of Jairus’s twelve-year-old daughter and the woman
who had been haemorrhaging blood for twelve years, by the healing Jesus brings through touch. All life, from humans to animals, from animals to plants, from plants right down to bacteria, depends upon sentience: the touch of light, of liquid, of air, of earth. All things live in and compose complex and subtle eco-systems of relations between what is inside and what is outside; relations that touch, move, animate. In the opening of the first Letter of John, the author writes of Jesus as the Word of life: “we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it and felt it with our own hands.” And yet later in the same letter the author will emphasize that no one has ever seen God. In Christ, God gives Godself to be handled – even to the point of being crucified, manhandled.

There is life and healing in being touched by God: “I beg you,” Jairus says, “come and lay your hands on her so that her life may be saved.” There is life and healing in touching God: “If I touch even his clothes,” the woman said, who had spent all she had on doctors and to no avail, “I shall be healed.” And Mark makes a point of this in his narrative because he emphasizes how the crowds are pushing Jesus around and yet he knows the touch of the woman on the hem of his cloak. “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples get edgy: “You see the crowd pressing round you and yet you ask ‘Who touched me?’” Liquid, ebbing away and poured back into her, is the image of life itself in this account: life that flows. The flow of the blood from her body is dried up by the flow of power out of Jesus. Contact between the outside and the inside; webs of unseen relations, unseen influences, drained away and established. Webs and influences that we register in our bodies as if we creatures were barometers, sensitive to the pressure of air. This is sentient life: living attuned to everything around us, everything created in God, by God, through God. Relations that are attuned to a divine ecology in which and by which we are healed or, as Jairus says of his daughter, “saved”. Right relations restored between God and God’s created order through flows of love and justice; flows of reconciliation and restfulness; flows in which we, and all things created, are enfolded. We can live in flows of divine power that touch and transform us; that give life liberally, generously, abundantly. These are the flows of touching influence that bind one thing to another.

When you come up the altar rail to receive communion or a blessing then take a look at the sculptured relief behind the high altar of Christ on the cross. What you’ll notice is angels on either side of Jesus’s arms. They are holding goblets rather gruesomely beneath his nailed wrist; goblets in which the blood of Christ is being caught. It’s a theological depiction of the Eucharistic sacrifice; a depiction that illustrates the words said by the
priest over the bread and wine: This is Christ’s body broken for us. This is Christ’s blood poured out for us. It’s a pictorial depiction of what is held by faith as our salvation: as we participate in eating the wafer and drinking from the chalice, we are touched by Christ like Jairus’s daughter or we touch Christ as the woman who was haemorrhaging. It’s a depiction of the healing flow we receive from Christ that makes us whole and restores us to right relations. Right relations not just with each other, but with the flows of air that give us breath, and the earth which provides us with food, and the light that nourishes sentient life on that earth, and the water everything needs in order to live at all. All the very basic and most fundamental relations that constitute that complex and subtle ecosystem that makes flourishing possible. We drink and eat from the source of life; that divine power that flowed through the veins of the human Christ and sparked the electro-chemical discharges that released the hormones and regulated the heartbeat of that sacred body. We are touched by God and God touches us: “O sacrum convivium! In quo Christus sumitur” (O holy feast/at which Christ is taken in as food.) “‘Talitha cum’, which means ‘Get up my child’.” Arise. Be resurrected.

We’re a very long way from Star Trek and all those papers being written for that conference on transhumanism. Or are we? As I said transhumanism is the belief that since human beings are evolved creatures then there is no reason to think further evolution is not possible. All the possibilities for the further evolution issue from creation itself, and from its uncreated Creator. We, and all things, are caught up in its changes as we move from glory to glory. We are not what we shall be. And what we shall be is yet to be revealed – as we discover ourselves in Christ, by touch.