

“WHO TOUCHED ME? (Mark 16)”

Mark 5:21-43

Naomi, that was her name. It means “Pleasant” and she’d been such a pleasant girl – a model child, really; always involved in things, always interested in life, always kind and thoughtful. Her parents had high hopes for her, provided they could find the right husband for her. There was any number of boys at the synagogue who would have been ideal, and she was certainly able to turn the heads of a few with her modest smile and her self-assured attitude.

She turned twelve and it was soon obvious that she was now able to get married and have children. Everything had started to happen as it should and there were moves afoot to suggest a betrothal to the son of one of the synagogue leaders. But things started to go wrong. Her young body started to behave in strange ways. She didn’t realise, at first. She just assumed it happened to everyone as their bodies began to grow up. After a while, though, her mother noticed something was up – it wasn’t that difficult to spot if you were the one doing the washing. There always seemed to be blood on something. After a couple of months, she spoke to Naomi about it and the awful truth began to dawn. Some kind of haemorrhaging was going on. Naomi’s mother spoke to her father and she was whisked off after dark one night to speak to one of the rabbis at the synagogue.

The rabbi was a kindly man but there was no way round the Torah, whoever interpreted it. It didn’t take him long to find the passage in *Leviticus 15* which contained the instructions about how to deal with women who bled. The rabbi assured them that he would keep it confidential, but word soon began to get around. After all, Naomi suddenly stopped going along to the synagogue where she had been used to sitting at the back with her mother and all the other women. The young men who had taken such a keen interest in her suddenly realised that she was no longer there and they didn’t see her out in the street much. Their mothers picked it up first, picked up what the problem was, and told their sons to keep away on pain of punishment from the priest. Soon everyone knew. Naomi was unclean.

The next few months were something of a nightmare as Naomi was taken round from doctor to doctor. Her father had more or less disowned her when it started to become obvious that this was not a problem that could be sorted out with a couple of potions and a change in diet. And then her mother died and Naomi, still in her teens, was left on her own. She kept trying with the doctors, despite the general suspicion and mistrust of their profession – one of their scholars had actually said, “*Even the best among doctors is worthy of Hell*” – but they weren’t cheap, and it became increasingly clear that they weren’t very good either.

With no resources left and no possibility of a cure, it seemed, Naomi was more or less abandoned. She hated the physical discomfort and the daily inconvenience of the bleeding. Sometimes it was worse than others, but it never really allowed her any respite. But it wasn’t just the physical side of it that got her down. She couldn’t go to the synagogue or meet with anyone to offer worship to her God. She couldn’t spend time with anyone else or they too became unclean. People avoided her in the street and gave her a wide berth in case they accidentally touched her and then had the inconvenience themselves of going to be made clean by the priest. She couldn’t buy things in the market because no-one could touch her money without making themselves unclean. So she scavenged for food and found a bit of help from a few Greeks who, like her, lived on the margins of the community. And she could only get water from the well when she was sure no-one else would be around, usually in the fierce heat of the Galilean noon.

The self-assurance of Naomi’s childhood and early teens was gone. Her head was always bowed as she scurried about the back lanes. There was no shred of dignity in her life any more – even the children called her names. She was now in her twenties and unmarried – that was bad enough! But most people knew why she had no husband and why she kept herself to herself. And if they didn’t know exactly what the problem was, it wasn’t too difficult to make something up. The life of the neighbourhood went on without her. She had no opportunity for worship, for community, for dignity. Just like the man had who

lived in the graveyard over the other side of the lake, she no longer had any humanity left. Somehow, most people found themselves unable to recognise in her the image of God, so they shunned her. She had nothing. She was nothing.

And then she started to hear odd snippets of conversation as she scuttled round the edge of the crowds by the market. As she sat in the cool darkness of her home one afternoon, she heard a group of women outside her window talking about a miracle man. She had heard odd rumours about him a few weeks before, about the power he seemed to have to heal people, and she'd also discovered that he'd caused a bit of a scene in the synagogue on one occasion. One of the women had heard that this man had transformed the life of a notorious psychopath on the eastern shore of the lake and there was talk that this man – Jesus, son of one of the carpenters up in Nazareth – had been seen heading for their village with some of his friends.

As the women moved away from Naomi's home, their conversation tailed off, but she had heard enough to know that this was worth a try. After all, she'd exhausted all the other possibilities – doctors, priests, rabbis, they'd all proved useless. She had nothing to lose here – mainly because she had nothing, not even her dignity, her humanity. Naomi scabbled around in the small pile of clothes in the corner and found a head covering that she had never worn and a cloak that she had only ever been seen in once. Pulling the covering right over her head so that her face was more or less hidden, she waited until the lane was deserted and slipped out of her front door. Her head bent over to avoid recognition, she hurried towards the centre of the village.

The miracle man had obviously arrived because there was now quite a crowd in the little square where the market was held. In the middle of the crowd was a man she did not recognise, but who was obviously the centre of attention. He was trying to move across the square and it looked as if he was in a hurry, but there were so many people around him it was making progress almost impossible. It must be him. All she could think of now was how to get to him without attracting attention. There was no way she could ask him for help or the crowd would be on her like a shot and she'd be hustled out of the square – probably out of the village and out of the area. She'd heard that sometimes with these healer people – and there were quite a few of them who wandered around the towns and villages of Galilee – if you just touched part of their clothing it could work. It was a kind of superstition, but she was so desperate for it to work that she had forced herself to believe it.

Head down, Naomi wormed her way through the crowd. Fortunately, everyone was so intent on seeing and hearing the miracle man that they were prepared to ignore the bent figure pushing between them, and eventually she could see him right ahead of her. He was being jostled on all sides by people eager to ask him questions, seek his advice, hear his wise words. That was great, as far as Naomi was concerned – less chance of her being discovered. Now he was within arm's reach and she stuck out her hand and touched his cloak. She didn't tug on it or grab a handful. It was almost a stroke down one of the folds near the hem, gentle but desperate.

Naomi had never really been able to describe it to people who'd asked afterwards what happened. There was strange sensation deep within her, a kind of knotting feeling. She'd never felt anything like it before and never expected to feel it ever again. But as it happened she knew, she knew that it was OK. In her imagination it was as if a stopper had been put into a bottle right inside her. All she needed to do now was go to the priest and it shouldn't be too difficult to prove that she was well again. She needn't go into all the details about how it happened, but she might then be able to go and begin a new life in another village, away from all those who had denigrated, stigmatised, ignored, dehumanised her.

As she backed away from the miracle man, retreating into the still jostling crowd, she saw him look round. He stopped in mid sentence and said, in what she felt was a rather aggressive manner, "*Who touched my clothes?*" Before Naomi herself could think, "What a daft question!", a couple of the miracle man's friends turned to him and said, "Look at this crowd. They're practically carrying you along.

They're all over you. How on earth can you expect to identify someone giving you just a touch in all that?"

The man looked slightly bewildered and kept scanning the crowd. "No," he said, "it wasn't 'just a touch'. Something happened. I felt some kind of power go out of me. Someone touched me who really meant to touch me and it's made a difference to them." He was no longer aggressive. There was a kind of pity in his eyes. Somehow he seemed to understand. It may have been the touch of a superstitious person, but there was a real faith behind it, a genuine expectation that it would actually achieve something. The people immediately around him were looking at each other quizzically. The crowd fell silent. Naomi shrank back into her cloak.

Then she thought, "If he knows something happened, then he'll probably know who did it, or, at least, he'll know how to find out." Well, as far as the way in which the people of the village treat her, things can't get any worse than they already are. She's lost everything she ever had. And this Jesus now seems to be staring right at her. So she moves forward and slumps at his feet. After the exhilaration of the moment of healing, the possibility of a new start, it now seem as if her world has fallen back in again and her mouth is dry with fear. But there's no going back now. She confesses all. Some in the crowd recognise her voice and she hears her name being whispered around the little square. As far as the villagers are concerned her voice has given her away, and there's no sympathy for her, not even a patronising pity. She's spoiled their afternoon with Jesus.

But, as far as Jesus is concerned, it's her faith that's given her away. There's a simple belief that he can help, that he can transform her life, that he can restore her humanity – and he's felt it. She knows nothing else about him, she has no idea that he is the Messiah, no doctrine of grace or theology of redemption. She just knows he can help. And as she has expressed that in the simplicity of her action, he has responded. So he speaks to her. "*Daughter,*" he says, the only time in Mark's record of his life that he uses this word of love and compassion, "*Daughter, it's enough just to believe. You're healed. You're whole again. Take back your dignity. Take back your humanity. Take back your place in this community. Enjoy the shalom of God.*"

Well, it wasn't just the priest who heard of the healing. Everyone did. There'd be no doubting now that she was a whole woman again. All she'd done was reach out – as a last resort, really – and Jesus had honoured her faith. He'd asked no questions. He set her no tests of commitment or knowledge or suitability. He'd responded to her belief that he could do something. He'd welcomed her into the new kingdom which he'd come to inaugurate – a kingdom of people who are truly human as God wants them to be, a kingdom of men and women and children who are whole, who enjoy shalom, who are community, who have a hope and future – people who have finally realised after trying so many other alternatives, adopting so many other agendas, that the only agenda that can truly be trusted is that of Jesus himself. How about you?

Listen to these words. A poem by R S Thomas, from his 1972 collection *H'm*. It's called *The Kingdom*.

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with*

*Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*