

A Second Touch

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. A very happy new year to all of you. I think you can still say that, can't you? I was saying to somebody in the congregation, I generally say it through till about the middle of April.

I'm just kidding. It's wonderful to see you all, and thank you for coming along. Before I start to try and teach you, maybe we could have a word of prayer together as we sit.

Why don't we bow our heads? Gracious Father, at the beginning of this new year, we want to pray that this coming year, we might seek you earnestly.

Your word assures us, Father, that if we come close to you, you will come close to us. And Father, may that be our prayer for this new year.

That, Lord, we might seek in new ways to come closer to you, that you might come closer to us. And we might know what it is to live in the light of the fullness of life that Jesus told us was the birthright, almost, of his disciples.

[1 : 11] So I pray now, in this time together, in this house of God, that we may come to your word with expectant hearts.

And Father, you would speak to us. And Father, we might hear you and respond. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. So, Ephesians chapter 19 and verse 2, Paul asked the elders of the church in Ephesus, I mean, this is not just your kind of run-of-the-mill people who show up, you know, now and then to church.

These are the people who were there week by week and led the church. And Paul says to them, kind of impudent in a way, I guess, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

I don't know if there was anything visibly lacking about these men, but Paul asked them the question, and they honestly answered.

He said, no, we never heard of the Holy Spirit. So, there's a wonderful story, which I think is worth retelling, about a pastor in the Midwest of America who was greatly beloved by his congregations.

[2 : 37] He visited the sick and kept his sermons brief. People loved him for that. Just saying. But he had one habit that his elders were very concerned about.

And it was this, that at the same time every day, five o'clock, he would walk down from the church office down to the crossing on the railway that went through their town, and he'd simply stand there and watch the train go through.

And, you know, at first they thought, is this train spotting? And then they realized, it's the same train every day, so it's the same number every day. So it wasn't much fun train spotting down there. So they put their heads together.

And they decided to ask him what was going on. They were slightly frightened that there may be some sinister reason for him doing this. So they called him in, and they said to him, Pastor, why is it that you go down to the train track at the same time every day and watch the train go through?

Pastor said, oh, that's simple. He said, it's the only thing in this town that moves that I don't have to push. Having spent the greater part of my ministry ministering to clergy, I am sad to say that there are some clergy who end up slightly like that.

[4 : 09] A little cynical, occasionally a little bitter, that whatever they expected of their ministry, it's never, ever quite delivered.

I remember once giving a lift to a curate, and he got in my car, and he was going on a two-week holiday, and I said to him, you're looking forward to your holidays. He said, I'm glad to be rid of that lot for a fortnight.

I said, what do you mean? He said, this would be a great job if it wasn't for the congregation. I said to him, it would be no job if there was no congregation.

You know, calm down. But what about the rest of us? Isn't it true that many of us occasionally feel that our Christian walk feels more push than being pulled along by the power of God in his Holy Spirit?

Are there not days, friends, where God seems very distanced from us, and sometimes days can become weeks, and weeks can become months, and months can even become years?

[5 : 23] I want to try and address that today with you. At the beginning of the new year, I'm not making any assumptions about you. I'm not assuming that everybody in the house this morning knows God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

I'm not assuming that you're all depressed and worried beyond, I'm not making any assumptions, other than the fact that you're here, and as far as I can see, you're still breathing.

And neither is it my intention to depress you by cataloging all the reasons why we might face this new year with a sense of anxiety.

This new year is upon us, and I think what I can say with some confidence is that almost everywhere you look at the beginning of this new year, there will be good reasons for feeling on the anxious side.

And no amount of food, no amount of alcohol, no amount of holidays, no amount of spending, no amount of, no escapism of any kind will help you get rid of that anxiety.

[6 : 50] I told you this before, you know, but there is economic anxiety at the moment. Some of you will be financially stressed, and you will feel that you have to keep quiet about that.

There is environmental challenges, it's not for me to tell you what you must think of these things. But clearly, even in this last week, we have had rainfall like we've never had before, and as we sit here in the dry today, river levels are still rising a little further up the River Severn and places will be flooded.

There are eschatological concerns, let me put that in English for you. Many, many writers at this point in time are asking themselves this question and by implication asking us, where will it all end? And then there are emotional challenges. I read some academic psychology papers on the impact of COVID upon the nation's mental health.

Again, I don't want to catalogue that with you, but I didn't find one writer who thought that the long-term impact of COVID-19 on our mental health would be a positive thing.

[8 : 10] And I think we're seeing that now reflected in the statistics of people who are off work with mental illness, people who are waiting for an appointment on the national health to have their mental illness treated, etc., etc.

But then more personally, the emotional challenges are around broken relationships, whether caused by irrevocable breakdown, by loss, by loneliness, whatever.

or again, being ill at this time. As we speak, the junior doctors are on strike. The threat of illness in myself or in someone I love seems a little more forceful in these days.

We live in anxious times, wars, famines. Last weekend, in the Times colour supplement, and also in a number of blogs, there appeared stories of reconciliation.

Stories whose intention is to lift our spirits at the beginning of a new year with whatever that new year holds for us. Take, for instance, the story of Carl Benson and John Pritchard.

[9 : 31] Through no fault of his own other than his morality, a woman he made pregnant who left him long before she had the baby had a son who became known as John Pritchard.

He was put up for adoption by the mother. And for 50 years, he lived happily in the home, believing that his father was his father.

Turns out, and he only discovered this when his mother, mistakenly thought she was on her deathbed, told him that the man he treated as his father for 50 years was actually not his father.

All she did was she gave him a name and she gave him a place. She gave him the name and the place was Brighton. He started to do some research and discovered where his father lived.

They met together. And there was a great reconciliation. I can see why stories like that might lift our spirits.

[10 : 39] It certainly lifted mine to read about them. I was moved as I heard them quoted speaking about the lost years. 50 of them.

50 lost years. Eventually, eventually, after 50 years of not knowing his father, he met his father.

And they speak about lost time. I've noticed this, and some of you will have noticed it too, that the older we get, the idea of time seems to change within us.

On the one hand, does it seem that the passage of time seems to accelerate to you? The older I get, the quicker it goes. I can't believe it's been Christmas and New Year again.

The second thing is, and I think this is a wise thing, we become aware that whatever time we have left, we should, to use a Bible phrase, use that time aright.

[11 : 45] psalm 90, the psalmist writes this, teach us to number our days aright, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom. I don't want to offend you in any way, but just getting older on its own doesn't make you wiser.

Some of the most childish people I know are old. But what about those lost years? What about the lost years of your walk with God as revealed to us in Jesus?

I call this talk a second touch. Could have called it a first touch as far as some of you are concerned. For some of you do not even know what it is to be touched by God, not even for the first time.

Some of you have been touched by God, but your experience has faded. In the book of Isaiah chapter 64 and verse 6, the prophet writes this, all of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

We all shrivel up like a leaf. Is this a day? When you might be honest before God and speak the truth to Him that your faith has become a little shriveled.

[13 : 18] And what you would long for is another touch from God that would re-energize your faith batteries, which would give you incentive and power to come close to God that He might come close to you.

I want briefly to give you two examples from Scripture of what I'm talking about and then one example from church history. Spoiler alert, you Methodists are going to love it.

the first one is in Mark chapter 8 and verse 22. This is a story of a healing of a blind man at Bethsaida.

Jesus and His disciples came there and a blind man begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village and when he spat on the man's eyes, sorry, that's not disgusting.

What they thought in ancient times was that saliva was healing. Reminds me that my granny, I used to cut my knees every day playing football in the church, sorry, in the school playground.

[14 : 33] My granny always used to get the dog to lick me. Never did me any harm and it did make my legs heal and it made the dog a kind of voracious killer but so he touches him and Jesus says to him, do you see anything?

He said, I see people, they look like trees walking around. Once more, once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes and then his eyes were opened.

His sight was restored. See, I think that's why we need a second touch at the beginning of this year. We need our vision restored.

We need our walk with God strengthened. We need our hope rekindled. The second example from Scripture is the reading that we had from Acts chapter 19, this curious story of the Ephesian elders. did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized? They're like, what? We've never even heard of the Holy Spirit. And then this remarkable thing happens and I think some churches make more of this than actually we should.

[15 : 53] But what happens is, they say we've been baptized, they were baptized with John's baptism. That doesn't mean that John himself baptized them. John, as far as we know, was part of a quasi-monastic group called the Essenes.

Those of you who've been to the Holy Land will know that if you head out of Jerusalem on the road to Jericho and turn a right where you would turn left to go to Jericho, you come to the caves of Qumran.

Very significant caves in that they found in them Bible manuscripts on parchment. that rather reinforced the translations of the Bible that we have today.

A very famous part of John's Gospel called P46 was found there in those caves. But John would send his disciples out and his disciples would baptize.

So they knew the baptism of John. Paul said John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is in Jesus.

[17 : 01] On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

There were about twelve men in all. Look, some churches have built something onto these verses which I think isn't right.

And that is, you do not have to speak in tongues and prophesy to know that you've been filled with the Holy Spirit. Not going to harm if you do speak in tongues and prophesy, but they're gifts.

They're not meant for all believers. God gives his gifts as he wills. Whatever the outward signs of being filled with the Holy Spirit, and I think they should be manifest in some way, doesn't have to be prophecy and speaking in tongues.

And I know there are people in this church who are very hung up because they think unless they speak in tongues, they're somehow second class. I don't think you can justify that.

[18:13] From Scripture. This happened in this case at that time. It's not me saying I don't believe in the gift of tongues today or the gift of prophecy today.

I'm really not saying that. What I am saying is it's a gift of the Spirit. Not all the gifts, not all God's people have all the gifts. And if you think you do, pray for humility.

So, these elders, let me remind you, these are elders. This reminds us that you cannot borrow strength from status in church.

I, some of you know that before I retired I was a bishop. And I can tell you there is an awful tendency to borrow strength from your status as a bishop.

But I can tell you this, your spiritual leadership is always undermined when you borrow strength from status. I had a colleague once and preaching, he would say time and time again during the sermon, as a bishop, as a bishop, as a bishop.

[19:26] I said, you don't need to tell people you're a bishop. They can tell because of the clothes you wear. They've worked it out. No, borrowing strength from status is a really difficult thing.

And if you talk to people who've held high rank in the army or the navy or the army, they will tell you that though they can pull rank any time they like to, the ones that are honest and are humble say they don't like to do that.

Friend, if you are placing some security in your status here on earth, I can promise you this, it will count for nothing in heaven.

The last example I want to give you, this is where the Methodists get aroused, is John Wesley. John Wesley had been ordained in the Church of England for 12 years, before he was, in his words, converted.

In a small meeting in Aldersgate, London, Wesley records, one was reading the preface to Luther's commentary on the book of Romans.

[20:52] insomnia. I mean, I can't just say about that preface. If any of you have problems with insomnia, I would suggest you get that book and read the preface. I guarantee you will be unconscious within minutes.

Wesley's reading this, and then he says this, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

You know, the Bible says that when a sinner repents, there's joy in heaven. I would imagine when God heard John Wesley's words there, an Anglican clergyman, I think the champagne corks would have been popping, don't you?

I think they would have been great delight that somebody who could have drawn strength from status, who could have been far too proud to kind of believe that simple gospel stuff, was profoundly changed by it.

Changed for the rest of his life here on earth. And as a result, God blessed the church across the world with the Methodist church.

[22:21] What an amazing story that is. Somebody once wrote, there is no bigger tragedy than the tragedy of the unopened gift.

gift. I wonder, I wonder at the beginning of this new year, if there are not gifts that God has for you that as yet remain unopened.

Come on people. Be honest enough to admit that you need in some cases a first touch and in some cases a second touch.

Today is the day, well yesterday actually was the epiphany, but today is the day the church celebrates the epiphany, the revelation of God to the Gentiles, which speaks to most of us.

Epiphany speaks to us of the need for fresh revelation. At the beginning of a new year which creaks with the noise of uncertainty and turbulence. Let me ask you a question.

[23 : 40] Is this your moment? Do you have any expectation that right now God wants to speak right into your heart?

That you may seek forgiveness maybe for a habit that you would like to break, maybe an addictive habit. maybe you're in a relationship where there are patterns of behaviour that are just repeated and destructive and you know you need a new start and forgiveness.

Is it your moment to seek a revelation of God? To seek renewal in your Christian life? To discover a new confidence in God? A new freedom in God?

And maybe as important as any of these a new hope in God. Don't let your life drift by wanting your real life with God to begin at some stage in the future.

That question that we asked at the beginning, Russ asked at the beginning, what do I want God to do in my life in the next 12 months? It doesn't matter if your answer was a bit hazy.

[24 : 58] Let me try and focus it a bit more. What do I want God to help me to do in this next year? What do I want God to help me to stop doing in this next year?

Do I want hope or am I happy just to be a kind of religious wishful thinker? Or would I really like the hope that only a relationship with God can give me?

And do I need the help of God's Holy Spirit just to help me to cope? I might like to think just for a moment about those questions and come to your own conclusion.

I can't make any of you do anything. Do I need a second touch? What a great question to start the new year with.

I can only pray that you will answer that question honestly. So I want to end by asking you to stand please.

[26 : 08] And what I'd like you to do is just to take two or three very deep breaths. and I'd like you to focus your minds on the God in heaven who looks down on you, us, both, and wants to know which of you are serious in this, the beginning of this new year in wanting to grow closer to God.

I'm going to end with a prayer that was written by a guy called Greg Lavoie and it speaks to the lost years of our relationship with God, those of us who've experienced such things.

It goes like this, to sinful patterns of behaviour that never got confronted and changed, abilities and gifts that never get cultivated and deployed, until weeks become months and months turn into years, and one day you're looking back on a life of deep, intimate, gut-wrenchingly honest conversations you never had, great, bold prayers you never prayed, exhilarating risks you never took, sacrificial gifts you never offered, lives you never touched, and you're sitting in a recliner with a shriveled soul and forgotten dreams and you realise there was a world of desperate need and a great God calling you to be part of something bigger than yourself.

You see the person you could have become but did not. you never followed your calling, you never got out of the boat.

Father God, I want to pray for people in church now. Lord, then if any of those descriptions fit them, Lord, help them to know now that the only prescription to those descriptions is you and your Holy Spirit and your ability to work in us and through us.

[28 : 33] And Lord, that grace is unconditional. All we have to do is to say, yes, touch me, Lord, that I may see clearly, that my vision may be restored, and this year will be a significant year for me in my walk with you.

And a significant year for this church as it seeks to grow into the likeness of Christ. So we stand, Father, in silence now and pray, come, Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. So, Lord, we pray, we believe, help our unbelief.

And the people who agreed say together in a loud voice, Amen. Amen. Amen.