

NOLI ME TANGERE – An Easter reflection

Sister Hazel Smith

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her. John 20:11-18

The significance and importance of touch has been highlighted for us during the last eleven months. So much, that many of us have ignored until now, is expressed by touch: the sense of trust, reassurance, presence, joy, the sense of presence in recalling shared moments; relationships being renewed and strengthened in the touch of the other. How we have missed it, the touch and holding close of our loved ones and friends.

What an instinctive reaction, for Mary and the disciples in their bewildered and grieving state. Thomas, 'I shall not believe until I put my fingers into his hands.' Our first instinct would be to embrace, to seek a moment of encounter and connection and touch.

Yet Jesus says to Mary, *Noli me tangere* — 'Don't cling to me.' Her heart was already responding, but there had to be a change. For the disciples too there had to be a change.

Jesus, who had been their daily companion, with whom they had travelled, ate and drank, was alive! The touch of His presence was

essential so that they could truly believe. He met with them, ate with them, walked with them, invited Thomas to put his fingers into His hands. How many times He met with them apart from those recorded we do not know, though John says that if all was recorded, the world could not contain the books that should be written. These are recorded so that we may believe.

The touch and reassurance was there, but from now on that touch would be in the hearts of all men and women. In many ways, there's often no need for words, for expressions of love. Sometimes, a touch is a silent gesture, a wordless smile, a gentle hand, all confirming communion. Jesus shared a meal with the two at Emmaus. He lit a fire and cooked breakfast for them after a long night's fishing on the sea shore. These touches of love, and forgiveness, renewed them and from now on the meal He would share would be the Eucharist. Their relationships became such that at His Ascension they were not downcast but rejoiced in their return to Jerusalem. From now on they would know He was with them; they would know Him in the breaking of bread, so that we too might know Him.

Everything lay ahead, and though we have hungered for the Body of Christ these months, we too know His presence and look forward in that strength ... to the Bread.

I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation, and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible.

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech and beyond concept.

Thomas Merton – *The Asian Journal*

Sr Hazel Smith is an Anglican religious who worked for over 30 years with other sisters at their convent in Bedford, England. The sisters supported children uprooted from their families. From Bedford the sisters moved to the new town of Milton Keynes and continued working with families as well as providing hospitality. In recent years she had come to know Merton friends who visited Milton Keynes to spend time at the Merton Collection.