

Hands



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Whose unseen and sometimes unremembered hands hold our lives?

The late Old Bill Neidjie, one of the traditional Aboriginal owners of Kakadu, took me to the site of his ancestors where generations of his community have painted their life and dreaming on rock walls. There he showed me a small hand print next to an adult print. His father had placed his hand and splattered ochre across it and some 50 years later continued to visit this site. The hand print was an enduring reminder that his life is woven from others and in relationship with his law and heritage.

The Christmas story is a story of Jesus whose life is touched by different hands. At the birth of Jesus we have the rough and earthed hands of the shepherds, the faithful poor, who honoured him as the promised Messiah. Then there are the hands of Mary, tired from the journey and birthing, but blessed through her openness to the Spirit of God. Joseph whose working hands were that of a carpenter is caught up in events beyond his custom, his religious sensibilities or planning, yet he offers callused hands for the care of Mary.

Some years ago I attended a World Aids Day service in Darlinghurst hospice chapel. A story was presented of a young man in the last stages of HIV AIDS. He reflected on his life

through the impression of hands. His grandfather's old and gentle hands on his head, his father's handshake as a young man, his father's grip on the bed railing of his hospice bed, his small nephew's hands holding his trembling hand. His life was carried by the touch and memory of hands. Their hands reminded him of the deep connections and values in his life and their imprints were upon his heart.

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The Christmas story is shaped by the hands of people who had no interest in Jesus or any other Jewish baby born under Roman rule apart from counting for tax and control. Are such hands any different today? Hands operating from an ethos detached from the values of human dignity, fair justice and mercy, and fulfilling an agenda all too distant from the circumstances of the stateless, or disabled and or traumatised.

Michael Leunig captured a contemporary twist on the hands of bureaucratic leadership to a world in crisis. He drew an angel bringing a message to a shepherd, saying, "and you will find a lowly stable and a baby lying in a manger... and you will take control of the situation and impose security measures... and you will sanitise and disinfect everything and get rid of the animals which are a health risk... and you will gather statistical data and connect the electricity and install central heating...and you will introduce democracy and teach the parents to better themselves in a new global economy.. and you will show the child how to invest and be a winner and positive attitudes and good contacts and good advice... and if they resist... if they resist, call this number...report the situation... and wait until a team of experts arrive. So long as lowly stables exist there can be no peace on earth."

Luke's Gospel also records the song of Zechariah which needs to be heard in a world where mob hands have been used to punish outsiders or cross off the list of benefits for the disabled. God's song to people who have forgotten the poor is that each child matters, not because they can be counted, managed, controlled or what they might contribute to the economy but because they are loved and held by the Creator. God demonstrates such a concern by allowing the Son to become

one with us - Emmanuel. His birth is a message that the dignity, justice and mercy of each person in the hands of government and global leaders matters to God. It is a salutary reminder that the Child in the manger 30 years later had the religious and Roman authorities wash their hands and give him up for execution. Today, the message of Jesus needs hands that will do what those with power will not do.

God's purpose in the Child born in poverty however, is the invitation for us to be transformed and to touch the face of Christ. Dorothy Day, who spent 40 years working with the poor on the streets of New York wrote in the *Catholic Weekly*:

"I do not think I could have carried on with a loving heart all these years without Dostoyevsky's understanding of 'poverty, suffering and drunkenness'. The Great Russian novelist penetrated these three awful realities of human experience into the vision of the sacred hidden in them. It was his insight into Christ that gave him this light. God is hidden in our world but can be found in these three 'distressing disguises'; poverty, suffering and addictions which drunkenness is one of, are a kind of night that points to the dawn, which may open us to light."

The Saviour in the manger allows hands to hold him and for his hands to hold humanity. This gives us a signpost to what it means to truly help. The sign of a child in a manger is the sign of vulnerable love - a love that chooses to be open, to receive as well as give. The sign of the manger is not a handout but an invitation to participate in genuine loving relationship.

Our Christmas story says that God chooses to bring the kingdom of mercy and justice through human hands, the hands of love that touched the side of a manger and that were pinned to a cross, hands that offer reconciliation and peace to all of humanity. This is the source of our faith and action.

May the love of the Saviour help us to offer hands of compassion and hope this Christmas.

+Gregory

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