

Lections: Hebrews 9.11-15; John 20.19-23

When I was a lad the main shopping street at home had in it a bakers and a butchers and a wonderful hardware that had that amazing smell of creosote and wood, a greengrocers and newsagents, a fish and chip shop and a shop that sold knitting wool that we seemed to have to go to every time we went shopping.

Nowadays, by contrast, shopping streets seem to contain a pound shop, a mobile phone shop, an estate agent, Starbucks, McDonalds and very often something that's called a nail bar. For the uninitiated among you it has nothing to do with the hardware that used to be there. This nail bar is completely different to the place where you might buy half a pound of six inch nails. Instead, it seems to me – and this knowledge I hasten to add has only been acquired by looking through the window – you can have your nails done and not simply manicured but decorated in the most amazing ways. So it isn't just coloured nails that people emerge with but highly decorated ones and some of you may have been and had yours done.

It's a bit pointless for me really, I have horrible nails and wouldn't want to draw attention to them but for those with lovely hands and lovely nails I suppose it's great to have them looking special.

We're all used to looking at hands. One of the things, the powerful things that first struck me as I was ordained to the priesthood and gave communion to people for the first time was the way in which I began to recognise people by their hands.

Hands are held out to you and into those open, empty hands you gently place the host. And each of those pairs of hands held out to you bear a story – scarred, calloused by hard work, the small hands of a child, the large hands of a man, the cared for soft hands of one, the dirty, ingrained hands of another. The hands distorted by arthritis, the hands disfigured by illness, the pink palms of black hands, gentle, caring, loving, individual hands.

Into their fear Jesus comes and holds out his hands. It was the evening, the disciples were locked away in their place of safety, fearful of what might happen to them and Jesus is there. And his open hands testify to who he is. There in the palms are the prints of two nails – wounded, beautiful, unmistakable hands held out as a sign of love, held out as a sign of peace. There was no mistake, they knew him, this was Jesus. They'd know those hands anywhere – and though they were wounded now – yet they recognised them.

They were the hands that they'd seen touch the leper, they were the hands that'd lifted the children who'd come to him, they were the hands that'd raised to her feet the woman accused before him, they were the hands that helped Zacchaeus from the tree, they were the hands that raised the widow's son to life, they were the hands that'd taken bread and broken it, the hands that'd taken a cup and passed it to them.

These were the hands that they'd seen nailed to the cross, so that they could no longer do good, so that they were held firm and unavailable once and for all. But they were the hands that still seemed to embrace all, even from the agony of the cross drawing all people to himself.

In the ordination rite for priests, after the laying on of hands the bishop comes to each of the new priests and anoints the palms of their hands. He doesn't anoint our heads, he anoints our hands as a reminder to us and to everyone there that for a priest hands are the most important thing.

This great ministry to which we were called, women and men alike, this great ministry for which we were set aside, ordained by the church for the church for the world, this great ministry that we celebrate now, is the ministry in which our hands are vital – blessing and healing and breaking and sharing. With Christ's touch we touch the world, with Christ's touch we break the bread and in touching and breaking we make him known.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, entered the Holy Place not with the blood of goats and calves as in the old dispensation; in his hands he brought nothing but himself. All that his hands held was the story that they told, just as the hands into which we place Our Lord in this sacrament hold nothing but the story that they tell.

Each one of us here gives a huge amount in ministry to the people to whom we've been called to minister. But as priest in reality we bring only one thing – ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice. 'Nothing in my hand I bring' says the hymn. There's nothing to be brought but you, there's nothing to be brought but me.

In the debate in Synod on the ordination of women to the episcopate there was of course a great deal of talk about sacramental assurance from those Catholics in our church who cannot accept the ministry of ordained women. They cannot, they said, be certain that the sacraments that a woman administers have that divine guarantee of which they're assured when only a male line stands behind a male priest, when only male hands have guaranteed apostolic succession. But for me apostolic succession is no longer about that mechanical way of looking at the church – like some ecclesiastical relay race in which the baton of authenticity is passed on.

Assurance for me is when the church is faithful to Jesus and to the Jesus who stands with open, wounded hands in that locked room and draws the apostles from their fear into freedom. Assurance for me is when the church is faithful to Jesus who meets us in the garden of tears and calls us by name, who sends men and women to make him known. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us, 'those who are called receive ... [an] eternal inheritance' and that is a divine guarantee which gives assurance to each one of us.

God didn't want you as a priest because of your brains, or your energy or even your looks. He wasn't looking for leadership skills or your ability to work collaboratively. He wasn't interested in whether you could read a balance sheet or run a meeting or organise a Christmas fair. For some reason, best known to him, he wanted you and he wanted me – he wanted us to be his hands-on ministers, his hands-on priests – for simply who we are.

And we came to the task empty handed, we came to him empty handed bringing only the story that our hands told, the authentic story of real lives lived by real people with our gender and our sexuality and our ethnicity and with our scars and with everything else that makes you so special. We came empty handed and God anointed our hands, anointed our emptiness and filled us with his Spirit.

And day by day and year by year we realise just how little we have to give but how much we need to receive and that's why at the end of this Conference we gather once more round the table and into our empty hands we receive our God. And from here we'll go to place bread into empty hands held out to us and to touch the lives of those around us with Jesus' priestly touch.

Your hands are beautiful, really beautiful. Your hands are beautiful and as they break bread they become more beautiful as Christ's wounded hands are once more revealed. Hold them out to receive Jesus, hold them out that others may receive Jesus – who with wounded hands touches our lives.

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