

Christmas Midnight 2008

Isaiah 9.2-7; John 1.1-14

Hands

One of the wonderful privileges of being a priest in the Church of England is in celebrating the Holy Eucharist week by week, and then at Holy Communion to place into the hands of those who kneel at the communion rail, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ through bread and wine. It is an honour to offer Jesus to his people, in the sacrament of his body and blood, to be involved in that deep and precious moment when our Lord gives us the greatest gift of all, his very life given for the life of the world, and the life of you and me. Perhaps you know these words of the poet John Betjeman, who tried to express this wonder:

*No love that in a family dwells,
no carolling in frosty air
nor all the steeple shaking bells
can with this simple Truth compare
that God was Man in Palestine
and lives today in bread and wine*

As I go along the communion rail I notice the great variety of hands that are lifted up. Some hands are wrinkled with age, and show the effects of arthritis; Jesus is given into these hands. Some hands are youthful and smooth; Jesus is given into those hands too. Some hands are soft and cultured from office work, some are hard, showing the effects of years of hard manual labour; Jesus is given into these hands too.

Some of these hands will have been joined together in prayer; others will have been lifted up in anger. Some hands will have been put to good works, others to crime or some evil deed. But Jesus is given into all these hands too. Some hands are raised confidently, others with hesitation, as if unsure of their worthiness to receive the Lord. And Jesus is given into these hands too. And sometimes I think of my own hands, and wonder if they are worthy of Jesus at all!

A great gift

Tonight we celebrate a great gift, a great love. Tonight we celebrate God giving his Son into our hands in that great and historic moment in Bethlehem long ago, just as through Holy Communion Jesus is given into our hands in the here and now. And Jesus is given unconditionally, an act of unconditional love of God's part – for he is given into the hands of saints and sinners, wise people and simple people, rich and poor. He is given into the hands of the great and mighty, but also into the hands of those who think they are worthy of nothing. People like Mary his mother, who at the message of the angel announcing that she was to be mother of the Messiah, cried out:

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden
For behold from henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

Whatever drew you here tonight, know that the gift of Jesus is the gift above all gifts, and the reason behind all true Christmas and Christian giving. The love from God which Mary knew in her heart, and which the word of her song testify to, is the same love that God has for us, whether we are that saint or that sinner, whether we think we have great faith or very little, whether we are sure or very tentative. You may not even know for sure what it was that drew you here tonight – consider that it might be a mystery too deep for words, a mystery of love that we can only dimly begin to sense, that such great love that God has for us, that he sent his only Son for our salvation, to gather us back to himself.

A servant love

Let's say something about that love of God. It is so much more than a feeling; so much more than a sentiment. The love of God in Jesus is costly. For that love was a noble, kingly love, but also a servant love, a love that was to lead from the beauty of the cradle at Bethlehem to the ugliness of the cross of Calvary. Perhaps as we contemplate that Bethlehem scene tonight amidst the beauty and the wonder we can sense that love of God at work; but at Calvary, at Calvary, can we see the love of God at work amidst the ugliness and squalor of the Cross of Jesus? Yet it is the same love, for the Jesus that is given into our hands tonight is the same Jesus that was given into the hands of those who crucified him in history long ago. So great is God's love.

So much more than feeling; so much more than sentiment. Love to the death. A kingly love, to be sure; but also a servant love. The love that is God's life given for us, so that we might live to God again.

Response

So, tonight, with the shepherds and wise men, we contemplate the wonder of Christmas, and Jesus, who is given into our hands. And we can say, with St John, who in the hymn of praise which was tonight's gospel reading:

.....the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father....

But we cannot stop at contemplation, for it must lead to action. What God does in Jesus invites a response from us. A response from hearts that seek to enthrone the 'Servant King'. Jesus is placed into our hands tonight – the next question is this: 'What shall we do with him in the year ahead?' Now that he has given me his life, how can I give him mine? One of our great carols gives one answer:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him — Give my heart.*

Come to God's altar tonight for Holy Communion, whatever your tradition, and if not confirmed, come for a blessing. And I encourage you to complete your Christmas by making a spiritual resolution: To God, who gives Jesus into my hands, how shall I respond? What can we give *him*?

Revd Stephen Gough

