

Homily for Bishop Cronyn Memorial Church

By Mr. Andrew Irving

For Maundy Thursday

1 April, 2010. RCL (All Years)

In a few minutes, we shall begin the first of a series of ritual acts that shall shape us over the next few days – shape us in profound ways. In response to tonight’s gospel, some Christians wash each other’s feet on this holy night; others, like us, wash hands.

Hands.

When I am in Church I often find myself looking at my hands. I’m a terrible fidgeter, you know. As anyone who has had a cup of coffee with me can attest no polystyrene cup, paper napkin, plastic coffee cover, or sugar satchets is safe my distractedly busy fingers.

So, when I am in church, I really have to focus on my hands.

Sometimes my hands are clasped in prayer. Sometimes they lay quietly, with palms down on my lap. During the Holy Eucharist, when I come to the altar to receive the Sacrament, I lay my right hand open over my left as I was taught before my confirmation. I make the ‘little throne’ for the sacrament that St Cyril of Jerusalem once advised his candidates for baptism to make at their first communion - at Easter around 1600 years ago. And as I do so, as I wait for the minister to place on my palm the Body of Christ, and into my hands the Cup of salvation, quite often my eyes come to rest on my open hands. I expect the same happens to you sometimes.

Hands can tell you quite a lot about a person. A bit like old shoes, or beloved little frying pans, our hands bear signs of use, of wear and tear over time. On one of my fingers I see a recent scar from a slipped bread knife – cutting bread in haste at the beginning of Lent – it has healed now. On another the scar from the bite of deer which I received to my great shock when I was a child: I had failed to keep my mother’s instructions to keep my palm flat while feeding nibbling animals. Coincidentally, on the same finger is a ring my sister gave me when I made my second trip overseas from New Zealand: ‘the journey comes to an end when you have reached full circle,’ she said.

One does not have to be Lady Macbeth crying ‘out damned spot, out I say,’ while feverously rubbing her hands which all the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten, to know that our hands often serve as reminders about things that have happened to us, and the things that we have done. What stories do your hands tell?

Indeed, hands are so integral to our daily activity that just their appearance can suggest our occupation. My father, for example, has large hands, his fingers are thick and cracked and the cracks never can come quite clean. He is a farm worker, you see, and his hands are expressive signs of his life of labour on the land. My hands are smooth, rarely acquainted these days with anything rougher than a computer keyboard. A spade looks as unconvincing in my hands, as a needle and thread do in his. What stories of our lives and of who we are our hands can tell as we bring them forward to open them at this altar!

During these three holy days – this triduum – it is Christ’s hands that really catch my eye. Do you notice them? Christ’s hands which take bread, and break it and share it

among all of his disciples in that upper room the night of his betrayal. Hands clasped in prayer as the darkness circles around him like a noose, and his brow sweats drops like blood. Hands tied together while he is on trial before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, before the angry mob. Limp hands bound by the wrist to the cross-beam of the very instrument of his torture and death which he is forced carry to Golgotha. Fingers curled in excruciation as his body sags under its dying weight on the Cross. Hands cold, stiff and bloodied, washed, kissed, held, and left in the tomb. 'Behold my hands and my feet' says the Risen One.

Tonight, at the beginning of all this, setting the tone as it were, adjusting the lens through which we can properly see what follows, Jesus is among us *as one who serves*, he says. Watch his hands. In the middle of the meal, Jesus wipes his hands from eating and gets up from the dinner couch. With a seemingly familiar series of movements, his hands remove his outer garment. They reach for a long towel to tie around his waist: he is ready. His fingers stretch out and grasp the handle of the earthenware pitcher placed in the room for this purpose. He pours water out, pours it out over his disciples' feet into a basin. The sound of splashing fingers and feet and the sparkling light from a humble foot-basin bedazzle the hushed room. What sort of hands are these? What do they tell us?

It is no wonder that Peter yelled in protest: 'Lord, will YOU wash MY feet?' [*kurie su mou nipteis tous podas?*] Peter's question is about identity, not about washing: can someone he calls Lord possibly be attached to hands doing the work of a gentile slave?

Peter is quite right, of course. The hands of the Son of God ought not to be occupied with wiping feet. The hands of the one who knew that he had come from God and was going to God, ought to be occupied in healing, instructing, or blessing, - you know the sort of thing. The hands of a host ought to be sharing food, and patting on the shoulder, and raising the cup. Divine hands ought to be fighting given the circumstances. Mighty hands of a redeemer; the victorious outstretched arm of God who freed the Israelites from slavery. That's what these hands ought to be doing. Not wiping feet. Not wiping feet.

What do these hands tell us? Watch them. The hands of one who has the words of eternal life (Jn 6:8) do the work of a gentile slave! How can it be? The hands of a CEO are not supposed to pour the coffee! The hands of the surgeon are not supposed to wipe the bed-pan clean. The hands of a prime-minister are not supposed to polish the boots of a soldier. The hands of him through whom all things were made are not supposed to divest themselves of all power. The mighty arm of God is not supposed to be outstretched for a water pitcher and a towel. The hands of God are not supposed to be nailed to a tree. Looking at these hands we gasp: What kind of God is this? What is Christ washing away? Grime on feet? Or all our theologies about the way God acts, and the sort of hands God has? What is it that Christ is pouring out from that ewer? Tepid water? Or God's own self – taking the form of a slave (Phil. 2)?

Watch Christ's hands in these days. They have something to tell us about God, about the kind of things God does, and about who this God is who loves us loves us – loves us even to the end. We about to stretch out our own hands to wash and to be

washed. As we take pitcher and towel, as we receive Body and Blood, let us pray that we may have hands like His.