

Dear Friends,

As we approach the predicted second peak of Corona Virus in England and elsewhere, I am sure that we would wish to pray for people who are infected or caught up in stricter restrictions and for all whose NHS treatment for non-Covid ailments is being disrupted. In this Methodist Year of Prayer, I wonder how we can help one another to redouble our praise and prayers. Prayers of gratitude can do a great deal to lift our spirits and according to the Book of Common Prayer, giving thanks to God, *“is very meet, right and our bounden duty”*. It is also good for our wellbeing in anxious times.

One of the stresses we now face is keeping abreast of Covid guidelines. We know that just because an activity is permitted it does not mean that we are obliged – or even wise – to do it. We each have to assess the risks involved and give thought and prayer to how we should behave in the light of current circumstances. *“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you”* (James 1:5).

It is interesting to reflect on what we do with our hands when we pray. ‘Hands together, eyes closed’ is a mantra some will remember from school. Some people prefer to pray with hands outstretched as if receiving God’s blessings or with palms facing others in blessing. Some people adopt the ‘non-Conformist slouch’ in prayer, with hands on lap, others will lift their arms aloft, as if stretching up to heaven in celebration of the victory of Christ. I think each posture has a subjective meaning for the worshipper, and I wonder what meaning is conveyed to the observer.

Hands play a surprisingly large part in worship. When we receive the communion bread, many will offer their outstretched hands and form them into a crib, to welcome Christ and offer Him a home in our hearts. At our confirmation hands of blessing are laid upon us. When we are welcomed into membership, we are normally offered the “right hand of fellowship”. And of course, in the traditional offering, our hands dig into our pockets, thus playing an essential role in our self-giving.

I recently came across some articles saying that many younger people no longer know the informal hand signals that can make life easier. How do you ask for the bill from a busy waiter some distance from you in the restaurant? Perhaps you mime writing on the palm of your hand? Coming out of an exam

or interview that has not gone well you may have silently signalled to a friend by drawing a finger across your throat. Wishing a friend not to “let the cat out of the bag” perhaps you have mimed doing up an invisible zipper on your lips. In our house if one of us places an index finger horizontally across the top of the other index finger held vertically, the message is that it is “time for a brew”. A hand behind the ear lobe might indicate to the preacher that the microphone is not turned on. Hopefully, you never have cause to point to the back of your wrist to remind the preacher of the passage of time! Perhaps you can add to the list of hand signals that you would recognise. Our American friends may reverently place a hand on their heart whilst pledging allegiance to their flag, and the republic for which it stands.

Currently, a symbol of our care for ourselves and others is the frequent washing of our hands or the use of hand gel. Hand hygiene has never been more important or more symbolic. Unfortunately, the prime example of hand washing in the Bible is the sad one featuring Pontius Pilate. However, in Job we read, ‘those with clean hands will grow stronger’ (17:9). In my reflections, the lovely words attributed to Teresa of Avila came to mind:

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which He looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

May God bless you,

Keith

Rev Keith Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.