

Loving meditation

You can tell a lot about someone by how their hands look. Size or skin complexion give clues as to a person's age. Callouses or marks may point to types of employment that require working with one's hands, and tanning may indicate whether that takes place inside or outside. A wedding ring will tell you a person's marital status, as will the faded line of the place where a ring once rested. Nails, bitten or chewed might tell you that this person's hands belong to an agitated body; perfectly manicured cuticles might tell you that this person takes pleasure in the way their hands are seen and enjoyed.

And hands can also convey a vast range of human behaviours and emotions. They can be stretched out in embrace; lifted up in surrender; held gently in a moment of intimacy. Hands can point, or stroke, or wave. They can greet with the raised palm of a high-five, the powerful grasp of a handshake, or the naked aggression of a fist.

They pervade our language. Those who are a dab hand at a task may gain the upper hand on those who aren't. We lend a helping hand to those in trouble; we ask for a hand in marriage; we give a big hand to those we approve of; we avoid falling into the wrong hands. If we live hand to mouth, then we would do well not to bite the hand that feeds us. If we are unable to do anything, it may be that our hands are tied. Something imminent may be close at hand; on the other hand it may be far away.

Isaiah 49:16 talks of God's hands: God says to Israel: "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands". Earlier in the chapter, we read "the Lord called me before I was born". You were known, before you were capable of knowledge. There was no time when my love for you was not etched into my very being. I know you like the back of my hand.

These are hands of boundless creativity, epic scale, vast beauty, and unimaginable breadth. As Graham Kendrick wrote, they are "hands that flung stars into space". Yet upon this everlasting canvass we find our name inscribed, and we see that tiny as we are, we are known intimately, completely, and eternally. There is no time when God has known us and not loved us, or loved us and not known us.

A few days before he died, Jesus gathered with his disciples. He knows that the hour for his own departure from this world is near. He also knows that shortly he will be betrayed by Judas into the hands of the authorities, by Peter who will refuse to be recognised as his companion, and by the rest who will scatter and flee. As the burden of this knowledge weighs heavy upon Jesus, still in this moment he loves them, and loves them to the end. In this moment of extreme turmoil, knowledge and love meet in the most intimate of encounters. Jesus washes the feet of every disciple, removes his outer garments, emptying himself in the form of a servant to leave a legacy of love. Judas departs from their presence and Jesus tells those who remain that this is how they are to be known to others: as those who love, just as they have been loved.

When we come close to our own death we want to tell those close to us that we know them and that we love them, and we want to hear that we have been known and loved. When life ends, knowledge and love are brought together in us as they always have been in God. We can say that to our beloved with a gentle squeeze of our hands. Then we place our hands in God's and know that love makes us inseparable from them.