

With Both Hands

Luke 10.38-41

A Sermon preached at the Worcester ordination, June 29, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I'd like you all to hold both hands in front of you, palm upward, with the little finger of each hand just touching one another. Think about the Father's hands, that made the world, in all its myriad complexity, glory, and wonder, and think about the detail and care that went into those hands. And now look at the centre of each hand, and think about the Son's hands, that redeemed the world, and the nails that were rammed through each palm as he did so, and look at those hands again, and see how much the Son loved us. And now look at those two hands once more, and think about the Holy Spirit, and realise that the Holy Spirit's hands are the one's you're looking at now. That's ministry. That's what today's service is all about.

Ok, you can fold your hands away now. I wonder how often you use both hands. I currently live in the United States, where at this time of year every child walks around with an outsize baseball glove on their left hand. Baseball is more about throwing than catching – the point is not just to catch the ball but to throw it straightaway to the base for a run out so you can remove two layers at the same time. That single baseball glove says to me “Of course I can catch and prepare to throw at the same time. We are, after all, a culture committed to multi-tasking.”

We are indeed a culture committed to multi-tasking. It sometimes seems every aspect of life is being shaped so as to ensure it can be performed with one hand. It is actually possible to speak on a mobile phone, breast-feed, change a CD, eat a sandwich and drive all at the same time, although you might need your elbow for the steering wheel part. Students certainly write a paper, go to a party, text message their way into a new romantic encounter, and follow the football score all in the same evening, or even all at the same moment. This is something we learn quite early on, at least in middle school, and we notice it in teenagers because they're doing several things at the same time but they haven't yet learned the art of seeming fully present in each one. (Of course not, we might say – you have to go to college for that.) But teenagers are really no different from the rest of us. It's as if life is a supermarket, and we have one hand on the trolley while the other hand is always available to touch and sample the myriad experiences and opportunities available on one or other side of the aisle, tossing each consumer possibility into the trolley with little or no thought to the checkout.

I wonder what things make you interrupt the one-hand culture. What are the things you take with both hands? Maybe a ticket to a Lord's test match. Maybe an invitation to lunch with the Bishop of Worcester. To put the question another way, I wonder which are the places where you're content just to be silent. And I wonder who are the people you are content to be silent with. I wonder where and whom you think deserve two hands.

1600 years ago St Augustine of Hippo distinguished between two kinds of things. One kind of thing we *enjoy*. These are the things that are worth having for their own sake. They aren't a means to an end: they're a joy in themselves. They're things that never run out. You don't have to make an argument for why they matter: they speak for themselves. The other kind of thing we *use*. Things we use aren't good for themselves – they're a means to some further end. They do run out. They serve only a limited purpose.

I want to suggest to you that what we grasp or take or juggle in *one* hand is what we *use*, and what we yearn for and treasure and shape our whole posture to receive and cherish is what we *enjoy*. What we *use* only requires one hand: we can use a number of things at the same time. But to *enjoy* something, or someone, we really need *both* hands, because it takes all our concentration.

In today's gospel story of Mary and Martha, we see Martha, who wants to take God with one hand while doing everything else at the same time, contrasted with Mary, who realizes that God truly is a project that needs both hands. Martha is a multi-tasker. Jesus inevitably becomes for her just another item in the shopping trolley. Mary has only one concern in her mind – to enjoy Jesus. There's nothing else that's more important. Martha uses; Mary enjoys.

There's a story about the Irish humorist Oscar Wilde. He was at a party and the hostess came up to him and said, "Mr Wilde, are you enjoying yourself?" He replied, "Madam, there's so little else here to enjoy."

I want to say a little more about what it means to enjoy. It's easy for a deacon or a priest to feel anxious that they're not doing anything worthwhile. All of us have someone in our family who feels we're wasting our life being ordained. So of course we want to show we're useful. Think about that word – *useful*. We're busy, and full of activity, and hard to pin down. But then we're not being a deacon or a priest. Because the role of a deacon and a priest is to inspire people to *enjoy*, to witness that life is about enjoying God the way God enjoys us. Think about the moment you're at the children's holiday club, and it's ten minutes before the end, and you're thinking of starting the tidy-up early, and a child says to you, "Does God have a face?" Don't make a joke, don't say I've got to tidy up, don't give a reflex answer. Stay right where you are, and *enjoy* the question. Hmmmm. Maybe the stars are God's hair. Maybe the roses are God's nose. Maybe the waterfalls are God's beard. Maybe the oceans are God's eyes. I know what God's hands are like, because they've got scars on them, haven't they? *Enjoy* that moment.

And let's say you're shaking hands after the midweek service and a person says to you on her way out, "My husband died 50 years ago today." Don't say "Well I never," or "Doesn't time fly," and head back to take off your stole and sign the book. Chase her up the churchyard path and say "Do you still love him?", "Did it break your heart?", "Have you ever been able to love again?" Enjoy the conversation. It's what you're there for. Not to help people use. A hundred manuals and instruction booklets do that. But to be with people who are longing to enjoy and be enjoyed. To take people with two hands, for once in their lives.

Living life with both hands takes time – because what you receive with both hands takes longer to assimilate than what you seize with one. Above all living with two hands takes gentleness – because treasuring moments, people or places with both hands, rather than grabbing them with one, means cherishing them, tenderly noticing their details, carefully attending to their difference from you but rejoicing in your presence with them. When Bishop John ordains these candidates in a few moments' time, he'll be using two hands. By the way he cherishes and enjoys them he will be showing them how to cherish and enjoy you.

Notice that the distinction between use and enjoy applies to God too. God doesn't *use* us. God *enjoys* us. In other words we're not a consumer good God tosses into the cart and thinks about dealing with later at the checkout. On the contrary, the whole life of God is shaped to be in relationship with us, to enjoy us. God never deals with us with one hand. God always approaches us with both hands – because we mean everything to God. There's nothing more important in God's life than us – there's no reason to multi-task, for God's joy is *us*. The great mystery, of course, is the mystery of whether we will enjoy God in return, and shape our life in order to receive God with two hands, or simply try to use God as just one more consumer good in the shopping cart. One Reformation description of the Christian faith says that we were made to *enjoy God for ever*. That doesn't sound like a one-hander to me, however big the glove on that one hand. That's a project that needs both hands.

I don't know if any of you have ever seen an ibex. An ibex is a large and very rare mountain goat, about 5 feet tall. The male has enormous ridged horns that curve all the way round to his back. I once climbed a mountain up to 12,000 feet and suddenly caught sight of an ibex 300 feet away. I gently stepped closer and closer. This wasn't a moment I could grab with a quick camera shot and move on. If I was going to see the ibex close up, even though I'd already been walking six hours, I had to change my plans for the day. Softly and slowly I went closer and closer, one careful step at a time. I saw its proud chin, its huge curving horns stretching back behind its head. Finally I was 20 feet away from this prince of the mountains. And how I *enjoyed* that moment. I don't know how long I was there. But I felt so privileged and moved and deeply, deeply alive. And it took more than two hands. It took everything in me. *That's* what it means to enjoy.

And that brings me to the question I want to ask each one of the ordination candidates this morning; and it's a question you can only answer for yourself. The question is this. Has your formation for ministry taught you how to enjoy and what to enjoy? Or has it simply taught you how and what to *use* in a more sophisticated way? When you look back on your ministry in thirty, forty or fifty years' time, will you be able to say, "I enjoyed God, and brought others to do so, and I am ready to enjoy and be enjoyed by God for ever." Then, and perhaps only

then, will you be able to say you've had a ministry. Now, it's time to begin that ministry, to take it and be taken with two hands. And my prayer and commission to you is just one word. Enjoy.