

REFLECTION FOR HOLY WEEK

'CHRIST'S HANDS AND OUR HANDS'

In 1982, the Helen and Douglas House in Oxford, UK, was founded by Sister Helen and the All Saints Sisters of the Poor in co-operation with the Children's Hospice Movement. Sister Helen had a significant ministry with the children and their families. She tells this story:

"I had known this mother for some time as both her daughters suffered from a rare genetic illness, and were frequent visitors to Helen House. During the year, she and her husband went through a difficult and painful divorce. On Christmas morning, she telephoned, and I went.

Her thirteen-year-old died the following morning, suddenly and unexpectedly. Seeing her sister dead, the four-year-old said, "I wanted to die first", and five days later, she too died. During those days and nights that I was with the mother and her children there were a thousand and one things to do. After the funeral, there was nothing to do except to be there beside her. Surrounded by grief too immense for words, I felt physical pain which still recurs from time to time when I least expect it. By staying alongside, I was absorbing a little of her pain."

That simple but profound illustration of how our pain can be absorbed perhaps goes a little way towards an understanding of how the death of Christ took all his intense aliveness into the depths of our deadness in order to absorb it. His aliveness is offered in order to redeem our deadness.

And this has huge ramifications. If the death of Christ was to absorb and redeem our deadness, then the resurrection of Christ means that we are newly alive in Him and for Him. And that in turn means, as St Teresa of Avila put it long ago, 'Christ has no hands on earth but ours'.

After the Second World War, a group of German students volunteered to help rebuild an English cathedral that had been badly damaged by Luftwaffe bombings. It was an act of reconciliation that moved many. But as the work progressed, the students were not sure what to do with a large statue of Jesus with arms outstretched that bore the familiar inscription, 'Come unto me'. The chipped and scarred head and body were repaired, but both hands had been broken off and lost. Eventually, they decided not to attempt to replace the hands but instead to change the inscription to read, 'Christ has no hands but ours.'

That is, perhaps, an icon of our call to live the resurrection life. Christ has left the 'hands-on' work of building his kingdom to us; we are his representatives. It is a sobering thought, but a vital and urgent one, that for some people the only Christ they will ever see is the Christ in you or the Christ in me. This students' inscription does not capture the whole truth, but it carries a necessary message for each one of us:

The living truth is what I long to see:
I cannot live on what used to be.
So close your Bible and show me how
The Christ you talk about is living now.

St Teresa's words capture the sentiment of our daily task:



'Christ has no Body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on the world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.'

I commend the following prayer to you for your use during this most holy week, when we follow Christ on his journey to the Upper Room and then through death, burial, and resurrection. May your journey to the Cross this week lead you to the joy and celebration of new life through Christ's resurrection on Easter Day.

*O Jesus, Master Carpenter of Nazareth,
who on the cross, through wood and nails, worked our whole salvation;
wield well your tools in this, your workshop;
that we who come to your bench rough-hewn may,
by your hands be fashioned to a truer beauty and a greater usefulness,
for the honour of your holy name, Amen*