

1. The Generosity of God

Take a moment to look at your hands. When you are born, you come out with your hands closed. And every time somebody put their little finger by yours, you would wrap your hand around it, hold on tight, and not let go. As a toddler, you started grabbing rattles and little toys. When another child came near and wanted to take them away from you, it's likely that you said "Mine" and held on tight!

In school and college/university, you will have held tightly onto bicycle handles, sports equipment, a driving wheel, the hands of friends and boy/girlfriends. You'll have left clutching certificates.

When you started a career, you'll have grabbed the lowest rung on the ladder and hung on, reaching for the next, and the next as you gained more knowledge and experience. At retirement, you hang on to golf clubs, gardening tools, your pension. And when you get near the end of your life, you start hanging on to walking aids and the hands of others.

By nature, we are all '*clutchers*' in one way or another. And we often have a reflexive response when it comes to giving up something that's dear to us.

What a difference between our hands and the hands of God. In creation, God lavishly formed and fashioned. He created that which was good – very good. And then he opened up his hands. He gave his creation to those he created, as a gift to be cared for and enjoyed. Throughout the history of God's people, God opened up his hands and generously provided them with food, drink, protection, blessing, and love. The Psalmist declared, "*You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing*" (Ps.145:16). The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed in our first reading from Lamentations, "... *his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*"

When Jesus came and saw the needs of people, he opened *his* hands. He taught, healed, touched, loved, fed, and freed. And when he was about to be nailed to a cross, he did not hold on to his life. He opened his hands. Hands of love, and stretched them wide. How much does Jesus love you? *That* much.

It is one of the most profound promises of Scripture. When someone – *anyone* – comes to the point of reaching out to God, they can fully expect open hands from him. The open hands of God are merely the outward symbol of an inner

reality – God's generosity. Generosity is that part of God that sincerely enjoys giving to others in a liberal manner, leaving recipients gasping and saying, “*What a God!*”

Look at your hands again. Do you wish your hands looked a little bit more like the hands of Christ? If God needs to change your hands, it's likely he'll start with your heart.

Remember the story of Zacchaeus? Jesus had entered Jericho and was passing through. It didn't sound like he was intending to stop. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowds he could not, because Zacchaeus happened to be a short man. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. This is his story, told by Nick Fawcett:

'I only wanted to see him, that's all, find out what all the fuss was about.
I'd no intention of getting involved, absolutely none.
It was the last thing I wanted, the last thing I expected.
I was simply curious, you'll understand that, surely?
I'd heard so much about him –
the man who could perform miracles, forgive sins, change lives.
He was the talk of the town; we all wanted to see him, everyone.
But that was the trouble, the streets were packed,
crowds ten, fifteen deep,
and I knew straightaway I'd have no chance of getting close,
not even, given my size, so much as a look in.
It was the same old story: poor old Zacchaeus,
the butt of so many jokes over the years,
once again missing out when the competition started.
I'd grown used to it, even immune,
but strangely this time it hurt as never before;
to be denied the opportunity of a little colour in the drabness of my life –
all because God had been sparing with the inches.
It seemed so unfair, the final nail in the coffin,
and I felt like lifting a fist to heaven and cursing my creator.
But then a brainwave.
Why not climb a tree, I thought?
And brilliant – a grandstand view!

There he was, just below me, as clear as day!
Well, you can imagine, I was well pleased.
It was to be my claim to fame;
the proud boast that at last would make men look up to me –
I'd seen Jesus.

Only then, he spotted me.
I hadn't bargained on that.
I'd expected him simply to walk on by.
Maybe a smile, even a wave, but no more,
but he stopped and smiled and spoke to me.

I was dumbfounded,
unable to take in for a moment what he was saying.
And when it finally registered, I could hardly believe it.

He wanted to visit my home,
share a meal with me, Zacchaeus!

A bit of a cheek really, inviting himself like that,
yet I could hardly say no, could I, with all the crowd watching?
They weren't best pleased, I can tell you,
always considered me a mean old so and so,
a tight fisted, two faced swindler.

"He's gone to be the guest of a sinner," they muttered,
and let's face it, I was.

But this was my chance to show them
I could push the boat out once in a while,
so I hurried down to welcome him.

The trouble was, one thing led to another,
and before I knew it I was letting my heart rule my head,
paying back all those I'd defrauded, four times over,
giving away half my possessions to the poor.

A moment's madness?

Well perhaps, but that was the effect Jesus had on you.
He made you want to be different, to be like him.

I've regretted my impulsiveness once or twice since then,
I won't pretend otherwise,
yet I wouldn't change anything given my time again,
for though I'm poorer materially now,
I'm richer than I ever dreamt I could be.'

Prior to his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus didn't just have an iron grip on his own stuff, he also wrenched what he could from the hands of others. He was the chief tax collector, collecting taxes for the Romans but adding a bit for himself too. Until ... that day he had dinner with Jesus. We're not told what happened in his conversation with Jesus, only that he emerges with transformed hands. At some point in the conversation, the enormity of Jesus' generosity must have melted Zacchaeus and something changed on the inside. He emerges with his voice trembling with excitement and newfound conviction. "*Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor*", he gushes, "*and if I've cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.*" When your heart gets transformed by generous grace, your hands have a way of opening up.

God's generous expressions of love confront us everywhere we turn. They're there in the beauty of the world he created. In a fabulous sunset, or a rainbow. In the intricacy of a butterfly's wing, or the vibrant colours of a tropical fish. They're there in the abundance of good things that sustain us day by day. In the sheer breadth of food available to us, from the humble potato to an exotic fruit. In the comfort and security of a place we can call home. In a country at peace, not war. And in the wealth we enjoy. His generous expressions of love are there in the faces of those we love, whether we're looking at the innocence of a child's smile, or the wrinkled eyes of a face we've gazed upon and loved for decades. The question is: Do we see them? Do we take enough time to notice?

Look at your hands one last time. What is the truth about them? One thing is certain. If you live deeply enough with a sense of God's generosity, your hands will start looking more like his. They will start opening up more frequently. They will start opening up to a wider range of needs. They will start staying open for longer periods of time. And you will learn perhaps the most surprising thing of all. In the opening of your hands, you will find what your clenched hands never could. Joy. Real joy!

Let's pray:

God of great wonders,
we join with you in the joy of giving.
You give us life and breath,
you fill the world with beauty,
our hands with bounty,

and our hearts with the desire to give.
We long to be faithful givers,
modelling ourselves on you
who has given everything to us.
May your Spirit of abundance,
which gives more than we ask or imagine,
encourage us to give generously for your kingdom,
in Jesus' name, amen.