

Sermon for Maundy Thursday 2019  
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It has been predicted that by 2050 - and possibly much earlier - Artificial Intelligence (AI) will make 80% of white collar jobs redundant. Education, health - diagnostics and therapies, banking and legal processes will all be more efficiently carried out by machines.

Alongside this startling vision of the future is another prediction: that replacing the human brain with a machine will prove easier than replacing the human hand. Think of what it takes for us to judge without thinking how tightly to grip a tennis racket or a babies finger. Our future will be handmade.

Already it is possible to see a renewed interest in artisanal activities and businesses. How many micro-breweries, specialist bread and locally-roasted coffee shops are there now than there were a decade ago?

There is an awakening interest and desire to move away from fast, faceless mass-production to individual, "one-off", "bespoke" or "hand-crafted" things for our homes and for ourselves.

These skills and processes speak of time, talent and care. It is appealing to look at a piece of jewellery or furniture - or even a cup of coffee or bread roll - and know that it has been lovingly and painstakingly created rather than rolled off a robotic conveyor belt.

Hands. I do not know if any of you heard the Archbishop of York on the Today programme yesterday. He was talking about the fire at Notre Dame and the value of ancient holy buildings. He spoke of the beauty and the feats of engineering and architecture made by human hands before the mechanisation that we can employ now.

In the same programme the Chief Rabbi made a plea for those same human hands not to be sacrificed to inanimate treasures. He was thinking of course of the Passover, of the treatment of the Hebrews making bricks without straw for the great monuments of Egypt.

Hands. But why am I talking about hands when our Gospel is talking about feet? Because of all the many things Jesus was showing his disciples on the night before he died he was telling them about the power of human touch.

Let us look at this extraordinary Maundy Thursday Gospel again. John gives us a great deal of detail about how Jesus washes his disciples feet. He gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, he ties a towel around himself, poured water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples feet and to wipe them with towel that was tied about him.

There are many theories about this detail. The first readers of this Gospel were from the Greek community so perhaps needed details of Jewish ritual washing. If so the explanation part is lacking and the exchange between Peter and Jesus not spelt out. When Jesus tells Peter only his feet need washing he is referring to the full bathing a

person makes before entering for a ritual meal - only a token/practical foot-washing is then required.

Many have puzzled as to why the foot -washing takes place at what looks like during the meal rather than as traditionally before it. "During supper Jesus got up from the table" John tells us. Some say that this is because of an episode that Luke includes in his Gospel (Luke 22vv 24 -27)- an argument between the disciples as to which of them will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Maybe Jesus can hear this no longer and so demonstrates the message of service they still do not understand.

Or perhaps the writer of the Gospel, present at the meal gives this detail because it is such a powerful memory. The Son of God stripping then holding, cleansing and healing them. Jesus did wash his disciples feet but to do so he used his hands.

Elsewhere in John's Gospel Jesus calls his followers to spiritual gifts and to holiness, but here in his last meal with them he calls them to be truly human with each other. In the incarnation, in the humanity of Jesus we see all that being human holds. The tenderness that washes careworn feet, the love that we share in simple acts of service, kindness, human contact and touch. The word Maundy is the English hearing of the Latin for Mandate, Commandment. The New Commandment Jesus gives his disciples: "To love one another as I have loved you."

In 2050 if the prediction runs true our world will look different. We will perhaps have mechanised many of our service needs. But the true needs of people will not be served in this way. A website can show us how to do any number of things but only a teacher can look over our shoulder and point to where some working has gone wrong or pat us on the back for a job well done. A machine can diagnose and treat disease but only a human hand can comb a loved one's hair or hold the hand of the dying.

For all our advances and many of them are greatly beneficial we will never find the human touch redundant. Jesus New Commandment is never old news. As we travel through this Easter beginning with the washing of our feet we might remember the words of St Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no feet on earth but ours. Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good. And ours are the hands. Amen