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Wash Your Hands!

by Alan Misson

As you read this we will likely be entering the worst phase of the Coronavirus outbreak in the UK which we all hope and pray will not be as bad as the Italian experience. But who really knows? The UK seems to have taken a different approach to many other countries and we will not know for several months whether the most appropriate strategy has been adopted. Nevertheless we cannot have missed the very clear advice that we all need to take personal responsibility for our own hygiene especially through the regular washing of our hands as this should decrease the spread of the virus significantly.

The Bible frequently mentions hand washing. In the book of Exodus we can read an extensive account of the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable temple that the Israelites carried with them on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. One of the items made for the Tabernacle was the bronze basin for ritual washing described in Exodus 30:17-21

The Lord said to Moses, "You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They

shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.”



At a very practical level the need to wash was very important in order to reduce the spread of diseases connected to the process of animal sacrifice. But it was also symbolic, as washing represents the purification and regeneration of a person. When Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem a bronze basin was also placed in the temple courtyard for ritual washing. And such facilities for ritual hand washing can be still seen today, for example, outside Shinto temples in Japan.

In Psalm 26 we can read:

I wash my hands in innocence and go round your altar, O Lord, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds. O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.

What a contrast this reading makes to the one we are familiar with as part of the Crucifixion story when Pilate hands Jesus over to the Roman soldiers as described in Matthew 27:24

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.”

We 'wash our hands of someone or something' when we refuse to be involved with them any more or to take responsibility for them. What a contrast this type of 'hand washing' is to the regular washing of hands we are implored to do by the Government - 'hand washing' that is not simply for our benefit but for all those around us because it will reduce the scale of the coronavirus pandemic. Such regular hand washing can be seen as a sacred duty on our part on behalf of others and perhaps we can use the time we take to do it to thoughtfully bring to mind all those directly affected by this crisis.

Suggestions for Passion Sunday (29th March)

by Revd John Elliott

Passages from the Word

Jeremiah 31:27-37

Psalm 130

and/or Psalm 91

Matthew 20:17-28

The Teachings of the New Church

The New Jerusalem and Heaven's Teaching for It 293-294

Songs of Praise

339 Praise to the Holiest

277 My Lord, you wore no royal crown

278 My song is love unknown

Prayers

Thanks be to Thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which Thou hast given us, for all the pains and insults which Thou hast borne for us, O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother; may we know Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly, now and for evermore.

St Richard of Chichester

O King of glory and Lord of valours, who hast said, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world': be thou victorious in us Thy servants, for without Thee we can do nothing. Grant Thy compassion to go before us, Thy compassion to come behind us - before us in our understandings, behind us in our ending. And what more shall we say but that Thy will be done; for Thy will is our salvation, our glory, and our joy.

Alcuin

O Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Saviour, we remember and acknowledge the greatness of Your love which stooped to share our burdens and our griefs. We bless You for all Your mercies, and especially at this time that You who are the First became also the Last, that You who are God alone became Man for our salvation, and in Your human nature bore all temptation, even to death, that we might be saved.

Be present with us in Your Divine Humanity, and give to each one of us the abiding spirit of Your grace, that in Your strength we may go forth conquering and to conquer.

Book of Worship (1971) slightly amended