

***Hands, Face, Space* – a sermon for Midnight Communion Christmas Eve 2020**

Based on Hebrews 1: 1-4 & John 1: 1-14

If you had suddenly returned home from a desert island, having missed out on all that's happened over the last ten months, you might be mystified by a strange, three-word message that has appeared on billboards and splashed in newspapers and echoes across airwaves: HANDS, FACE, SPACE. 'What does it mean?' you might well ask. Is it some new dance craze? – Hands/face/space. Or is it the latest game, a bit like the old rock/paper/scissors? Or is it an unsettling message from another planet? Well, no, obviously – those three words are just a reminder of the precautions: hand-hygiene, face-covering, and physical distance.

They also sum up much of what we've lost – or had to give up – over these months. Hands: no touching, holding hands, hugging, caressing; intimacy. No physical expression of emotional support. Face: cover up that which is most identifiably 'you', your facial features. Cover your mouth, meaning no one can hear what you're saying or read your mood, or tell whether you're serious or joking. Space: keep your distance, 2 meters of separation. Better still, stay at home, behind locked doors. To cut yourself off from others is, for now, 'doing the right thing.' And yet isolation and separation are recognised as major problems of our Western society. Human beings are social animals. Or as God is reported as saying in Genesis: 'It is not good for the man to be alone.' We need company.

In Jesus, God steps into the space. Through the birth we celebrate at Christmas, the Son of God bridges the gap between heaven and earth, transcending the great divide, filling the space, and placing his feet firmly on the ground. It's a risky project – unsettling for us to have such goodness entering our dimension; and risky for God to get caught up in the shabbiness of human affairs. He comes and is born – an ordinary child in an ordinary home – and says stick by me, enter my space, and I'll show you the extraordinary.

In Jesus, God stretches out his hand to us. Previously, people spoke of God's hand raised in judgment, but in Jesus it is outstretched in greeting, offering to lift us up and to bless us. We might well reply, I'm not worthy, I'm not good enough, I'm ashamed of what I am. My hands are dirty; I'll only contaminate you. But God says, I have dealt with that – to use the phrase in Hebrews – 'Christ has provided purification for our sins' – his blood shed that we might be clean. He has done the sanitizing, we might say. Take his hand.

In Jesus, God has shown his face to us – he's removed his mask. 'In many and various ways, God spoke to us of old through the prophets', says the writer to the Hebrews. The prophets used great words, powerful communications, but at best theirs was a muffled message, only partially understood. 'But now he has spoken through his Son.'

God has taken the mask off, and articulates clearly so we can hear... And we can see: In Jesus, we see, behind the mask, what God is truly like.

He is 'the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's being.' Anything we thought we knew about God but doesn't fit in with what we know from Jesus, well, we got it wrong. We had only been looking at a mask that distorts the truth: in Jesus, we see the face, which is what really matters: perfect faith, perfect hope, perfect love – love that surrenders the appearance of power and authority in order to bridge the gap and make connection with the objects of that love.

We seek company. In Jesus, God gives us something deeper. God gives us communion. In Jesus, God comes close, fills the space, calls us by name and takes us by the hand. To express this and a whole lot more, Jesus left instruction to break bread in remembrance of him – Holy Communion. Christ's gift of his body is the gift that keeps on giving. It is the tangible expression of God who is with us and within us always, even when we feel most alone.

Until today, we have not included the Communion liturgy within our services to join in at home. It is not possible to receive Communion over the internet. However today, Christmas Day, I hope you will appreciate the Communion prayers. Through your imagination, in your spirit and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, draw close to him. Make it a spiritual Communion, through your faith, accepting the gift of God's presence in your life and your home. As we celebrate the day in history when God entered our human space in human form, welcome him now into your personal space.

As we take the bread of Communion, we hold the token of his body in our hands. As we lift that bread to our unmasked face, we know he sees us and knows us and loves us as we truly are. As we take and eat, so he inhabits the space that is within us, filling our emptiness with love, uniting all that is fragmented, and making us whole again. Come, in heart and mind, to the table: and receive the pledge of his love. God is with us, each one of us: Jesus, Emmanuel.