

## **WASHING HANDS, SOCIAL DISTANCING, STAYING HOME**

**Mt 26:69-75; 27:15-26**

We've heard those phrases often enough in the last month. What I want to do is relate them to some of the events of that first Good Friday.

The washing hands, of course, refers to Pilate. Although in his case it has a negative connotation rather than a positive one. It seems clear that Pilate wanted to do the right thing, but when he realised it might get him into trouble and maybe even cost him his job, he buckles. He thinks first and foremost about himself; he wants to save his own skin. Pilate wasn't sufficiently committed to what he knew to be right. He tries to free himself from any responsibility for Jesus' death by washing his hands. But it wouldn't have mattered how long he washed those hands; nothing was going to free him of his guilt. There's a legend that says that Pilate's body rises again and again to the surface of a mountain lake, and each time he is going through the motion of washing his hands. He tries continually to cleanse himself from his guilt.

It is like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play. Her murder of King Duncan haunts her. She begins to sleep-walk, saying over and over, 'Out damned spot', referring to the imaginary blood stains on her hands. 'Will all the perfumes of Arabia not sweeten this little hand?' No, they never will. But there is something that will – actually Someone. Jesus is the great sanitiser for the soul.

Jesus never washes His hands of us – no matter who we are; no matter what we may have done. So far from washing His hands of us, He actually opens His hands to be nailed to the cross for us. Only He can remove the stain of sin - any sin, every sin, your sin, my sin. There's that old gospel song that says, 'What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me pure again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.' Soap and water may be sufficient to remove the Corona virus from our hands. But the only one who can remove the virus of sin is Jesus.

As we wash our hands, let's use that time to confess anything that needs the Lord's forgiveness; any washing that needs to happen inside. Maybe instead of singing 'Happy Birthday' we can sing the words of another song 'Happy day, Happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away.'

What of 'social distancing'? Jesus experienced a lot of 'social distancing' as the hour of His death drew nearer. In the end even His closest friends desert Him. Peter does follow Jesus up to the courtyard of the High Priest, but he keeps his distance. And when Peter is questioned about his association with Jesus, he denies that he even knows Him.

Do we maybe have some 'social distancing' when it comes to Jesus? Do we keep our distance, while at the same time wanting to keep contact? Is it a case of wanting to get closer to Him, but also not too close? We may prefer to stay more on the fringes – keep our social distancing from Jesus, as it were. Maybe we're not so sure about greater commitment and the possible sacrifice and cost that may involve. Because there is a cost to following Jesus closely. He himself spelt that out 'If you want to be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.' It means choosing the narrow road rather than the wide one. There may well be costs involved.

But what we often forget is that there is also a cost in non-discipleship; in not sticking close to Jesus. Not being a committed disciple means we miss out on so much – we miss out on the peace of God; it means we live in fear rather than in faith; it means we lack the strength sometimes to do what is right; and most of all it may mean that we forfeit our eternal life with Jesus.

Remember the warning to the church in Laodicea in the Book of Revelation? The Lord says to them 'You are lukewarm. I would prefer that you were either hot or cold? But lukewarm is no good. And there follows the words of Jesus, 'Listen I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and will eat with you and you with me.' No social distancing from Jesus. He wants to be up close and personal.

All in all, Jesus wouldn't do very well in our present climate – no washing His hands, of us that is; no social distancing from us.

And finally, no staying at home. It would have been much easier for Jesus to stay in his home in heaven; much safer. But he preferred to venture out and, in the end, He paid with his life. Like many on the frontlines at the moment, he held nothing back in His rescue mission to a dying world.

In the words of Charles Wesley, 'He left His Father throne above, so free so infinite His grace; emptied Himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race.'

Or in the words of Paul to the Philippians: 'Christ, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!'

Jesus left His home so that we might find our way home. He became the child of an earthly mother, that we might become children of our heavenly Father. He experienced hell's worst so that we may have heaven's best.

In these days of so much washing of hands, we rejoice in the one who shed His blood that we may be made clean. 'Happy day, O happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away.'

Let's not keep our distance from Him. Let's abandon ourselves to His embrace, like the embrace of the father when he welcomes home the prodigal son. Jesus left His Father's home, so that we may find a place at home with the Father.