

# *Into your hands*

Encountering the touch of God

Kevin Scully

*This book is dedicated to the people and my fellow priests of the churches of St Matthew, Bethnal Green in London and St Mary, Castleton, Staten Island in New York, for whom many of these ideas and writings had their genesis.*

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## Foreword

Christianity is a hands-on religion. While some may find themselves drawn to faith through intellectual or mystical paths, it is what happens in daily life that marks out the true believer.

We need to remember that what brings us to faith is only part of our story. What happens afterwards is how we stand out from the crowd. It has been a humbling and exciting aspect of my ministry to see so many people roll up their sleeves and get stuck into the real stuff of life around them.

Christians are involved in their daily work, in their prayerful acts of kindness and in a host of creative and social projects throughout the world. So much of what is taken for granted in some of the Western social services had their roots in Christian charity: caring for Jesus in the poor, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty and the stranger.

That is no reason for the modern believer to be complacent. There are still many challenges in our world. The God who calls us to faith also calls us to work. In small and large ways, Christians can make a difference.

In this book Kevin Scully charts a path of God's actions in the world on behalf of and through God's human creation. He takes us to the very beginning of biblical narratives to look at how the hand of God is at work in our world. He starts with an artistic image. He moves through some well- and lesser-known parts of the Bible. He also draws on a range of examples from the world of art. In all this, he suggests that what we do is tantamount to a social art.

Kevin Scully is a practical priest. I have known him since the early days of his priesthood. He has served in the inner city of London for his entire ordained ministry. In that time he has been able to produce some thoughtful books, while maintaining the practical tasks of being a Christian in the modern world.

*Into Your Hands* points to the way God has given us life in his created order and new life in Jesus. It also reminds us that there is

a practical working out of our faith. We cannot but want to put our hands on the plough. After all, the future is in our hands as God's invited guests and friends.

*John Sentamu*  
*Archbishop of York*



## ———— Introduction ————

# *The hand of God*

The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican has one of the world's most arresting creative images. It is also perhaps one of the best-known because it dares to combine its subject with its means of execution. Creativity is used to imagine creation in the world. We start by staring up at this ceiling but end up being taken somewhere else. Michelangelo's image provides us with a fundamental link between God and humanity. The artist has portrayed the hand of God stretching out to the hand of the first human.

The image on the front cover of this book is a section of a much larger scene. The artist chose to use what many might consider an unhelpful image of an old man with a beard, more Old Father Time than the Almighty, to portray the Creator God. By looking at the hands alone, we can concentrate our thoughts on the thrust of the creation story: 'Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being' (Genesis 2:7).

In the section of the picture, the finger of God is just about to touch the finger of Adam. And that touch brings no less than life into the fleshly form. That touch can be seen as the loving exchange between Creator and the created. The touch is made on the tip of a finger, the outstretched extremity of a hand.

It is no accident that the artist concentrates on the hands of both God and man. On a relatively simple level, this might be understood in the complexity of human anatomy. The hand is one of the parts of the body that distinguish *homo sapiens* from other animals. Higher

primates, such as apes and chimpanzees, have the ability to grasp with both hands and feet. The structure of these parts of their anatomy is different in humans. Because of this, it can be claimed that humans are the only beings that have true hands. There are 27 bones, overlaid by a network of muscles, tendons, tissues and blood vessels all hidden from the naked eye (another complex accumulation of working cells) by skin.

It is, however, more than the intricacy of human mechanics, wonderful as they are, that is of importance. After all, the hand of God is a potentially powerful metaphor, one that can lead to sustained meditation. Of course, we do not know what God's hands would have looked like in this encounter. Many would argue that to suggest God's hands have a human form, despite God's making humans in his own image, is unhelpful. That does not mean we draw back from using the metaphor. It can be used to solemn or comic effect. The footballer Diego Maradona termed his controversial goal from a handball in the quarter-final World Cup match between England and Argentina in 1986 as 'the hand of God'. Not surprisingly, his interpretation of this event was not universally accepted.

Yet the image of the hand of God meeting humanity remains an extraordinary encounter. Michelangelo provides us with a profound theological insight in visual form. He is showing a mutuality that will become lost. The images on the chapel ceiling trace this initial reaching out from God to man to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of seeming perfection. This is a vision of what the Church calls the Fall: transgression after temptation that leads to banishment. Put simply, it is a story of creative grace being usurped. In the beginning, however, there are both a hierarchy and a potential for equality.

The hierarchy is seen in the portrayal of God, surrounded by angels in the heavenly realm, about to touch the earthbound man. It is what might be considered the distance between the eternal and the temporal. The equality is in the act of creation itself. The hand of God reaches across the chasm and gives life to humanity. In doing so, life in our hands can become Godly. This is in keeping with how

the Orthodox Church seeks to explain the actions of God in Jesus: the divine became human so that humanity could become divine. It needs to be stressed that this is not based on human effort. Once again, it is the action of the Godhead that allows it.

At the point of creation there is no frustration or usurpation of that potential mutuality. That is captured in the visual wonder of the chapel, as well as in the verbal constructs of the Bible. The artist has provided a series of pictures that relate the narrative from the enlivening touch of God to a human to the expulsion from the garden of Eden.

We see what might have been—our intended destiny—when we look at the detail of Hand meeting hand. One gives to allow the other growth: the recipient reaches out to connect with the gift. Growth could find its terminus in that which led to its existence. That is the potential of creation. Much intellectual effort has been expended on trying to understand or display this potential. Yet a seemingly simple image—illusory simplicity, given the mastery of form and technique on Michelangelo's part—can encapsulate much of it.

The artist, for all the florid depiction of the creative genius of God, provides us with an image of a simple link. In this visual imagining we see established the theme that runs through so many of the early stories of the book of Genesis: God and humanity are linked. Creation is an act of consecration, never more strongly seen than in the life-giving touch of the Almighty. In this benediction we see what we are told in the first chapter of the opening book of the Bible: 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31).

This is more than some smug satisfaction on behalf of the moulder of the universe. In pronouncing it good, God has blessed the created order and thereby deemed it worthy of care. In this order we find that respect and honour are owed to creation. It may well be that, throughout Christian history, too much emphasis has been allowed to be placed on the separation between God and his creatures, captured in the doctrine of original sin, yet even that can be seen creatively. After all, we have the intellectual and imaginative gifts to

deal with this and many other challenges. Such gifts can be used to good effect here. Having taken the future into their own hands, men and women lost touch with God. Much of the Bible—certainly the New Testament—concerns that separation and how it was overcome in and by Jesus.

That is a key to the Christian faith: God's hands took real human form. This is more than doctrine. For believers it is a truth captured in the link between the Creator God and Jesus, expressed in Graham Kendrick's hymn 'The Servant King':

*Come see His hands  
And His feet,  
The scars that speak  
Of sacrifice,  
Hands that flung stars  
Into space  
To cruel nails  
Surrendered.*

EXTRACT TAKEN FROM 'THE SERVANT KING' BY GRAHAM KENDRICK. COPYRIGHT © 1983  
THANKYOU MUSIC

It is inevitable, then, that in talking of the hand of God we will also focus on Jesus. We will consider aspects of the life of Jesus, particularly his passion and death. We will especially focus on his hands and our potential to reflect the loving responsibility of faith.

There is a good reason for this focus. The highlight of the Christian liturgical year is Holy Week. Many parts of the Church embark on a special journey of events and services that commemorate the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem. It can be a busy time for priests and people alike. So much of the faith depends on what occurs in a relatively short period. Large parts of the Gospels are given over to the passion: the betrayal, suffering and death of Jesus. Such a concentration can bring many rewards and insights.

Each of the Holy Week celebrations or services has its roots in what happened to Jesus. These events begin with the riding of the

donkey into the holy city, with Jesus being greeted and applauded by people who tear palms from trees and lay down their clothes in front of the animal. The rest of the week can be given to more restrained activities. These can take many forms: special services, *agape* meals, a gathering based on the *seder* meal of the Jewish Passover, marches of witness, walking the Stations of the Cross (14 tableaux that capture the journey from Pilate's judgment to the death of Jesus on the cross and his being laid in the tomb). To that end, some of the chapters in the latter part of this book will be given over to aspects of the interplay between the hands of Jesus and his followers.

In this book the emphasis will be on the creative interchange that flows from what is a relatively small canvas, captured in one of the images of Michelangelo's expanse of ceiling: the depiction of hands. We will find connections with the Bible and with our own lives. To aid this process of making connections, there are questions and exercises that readers may want to put to themselves or discuss in a group. Each chapter concludes with a prayer.

The exchange first seen in creation is the pattern of existence: God's hand stretching out to us, and ours reaching back to God. It is the pattern of the worshipping life. Once aware of the grace of God, we seek to praise the One who blesses us in our very being. This is caught in one of the songs of Israel:

*Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,  
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!  
Lift up your hands to the holy place,  
and bless the Lord.  
May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth,  
bless you from Zion. (Psalm 134)*

In this we can see that all human life is touched by the hand of God. If we sense God's touch, then we can reach out towards him in meditation and prayer. It is my hope that this book will provide its readers with an opportunity to do just that, to lift hands in prayer and strive to reconnect with the outstretched, loving hand of God.

God's hands are stretched out in life and in the death of Jesus on the cross. Our hands have a faithful demand on them to respond. Sometimes that responsibility can feel overwhelming. The stretching out of hands is, in many ways, a small journey but it can point to a longer journey. Thus we will be taking a journey that repeatedly returns to the loving gesture captured in the Sistine Chapel, a gesture in which God gives life to us all.



———— Chapter 1 ————

*And he brought them to see  
what he would call them*

The Bible is full of surprises but many of them can seem hidden even to regular readers. Familiarity with some parts of scripture may allow us to overlook some interesting quirks. There is one such exciting development in the second chapter of Genesis. In that version of the creation narrative, God effectively hands over the world he has made into the care of the first man. There is imaginative power in this act.

Think of a child playing with toys in a sandpit. The child's hands have moved the sand around, sculpting an environment for the toy people that are to inhabit this new world. The hands, giant-like in comparison with the tiny figures in the new landscape, place each of the figures in its allotted spot. Then the child draws back and surveys the scene. The action of withdrawal gives life to the new world. She may initiate conversations, speaking on behalf of each player in her creative drama, but she imbues each doll with a personality of its own. She is part of her own making that includes a vast distance from the mind of the creator to the action of her new world.

It is possible to discern a similar quality of play in the second creation story in Genesis. The Almighty has wrought wonders: the man has been made; the breath of life has been blown into his nostrils; a garden has been planted; knowledge of good and evil has been placed in the midst of it all; rivers flow; precious metals and jewels are embedded. Then God places man in the middle of the garden.

*Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. (Genesis 2:18–19)*

This is arguably the place in scripture where God hands over the created order into the stewardship of humanity. In the earlier chapter of Genesis, one that tells a different version of the creation narrative, we have been assured that God looked on all that he had made and it was very good. In the second account there is a mighty difference: God pronounces a flaw. God himself announces that there is part of his work that is not good: the created being needs a helper.

In what follows, man seeks his helpmeet. In doing so, he is given both the care and charge of all that has been made for him. God places before the man each living creature that he has formed out of ground and watches to see what the man will name them. This is a poetic variation on the charge given to the woman and man, created on the same day, destined to be equal and blessed: 'God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"' (Genesis 1:28).

Both creation stories point to the same core message: the world has been given into the care of humanity. From this follows a host of considerations. What is the difference between dominion and domination? Does responsibility to care for other species come only because humanity is more powerful? Is it proper to prey on them, even destroy them? Is protection of the weaker beings part of the onus of dominion? What is the proper management of a world where other creatures are there expressly for the sustenance of humanity?

There are many different responses to these questions and we might not agree over our answers. Indeed, we may find ourselves arguing for seemingly irreconcilable points of view. I have witnessed such debates and it can befuddle the listener to hear the combatants

appealing to the same sources, some of them biblical, to support their contradictory arguments.

The key to these complexities for believers lies in a basic premise. God has given the world into our hands. We need to try to place ourselves at some distance to comprehend the effects of our actions. We have to challenge ourselves to think outside of the world in which we live in order to understand it better. In effect, this is trying to put ourselves into an impossible viewpoint, that of God. Mystics and poets can help us here. The song 'From a distance', penned by Julie Gold but popularized by Bette Midler, provides a perspective on the earth that may not be apparent as we live and work on it. Colours, shapes, even individual and societal relationships, can be understood in a new way. The song's chorus assures us:

*God is watching us, God is watching us,  
God is watching us from a distance.*

This sentiment can be moving when heard in its musical form but risks banality on the page. Songs make sense when they are heard.

A 14th-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, provides a useful image for us. In much the same way as we can compare the playing child to the distant God, we can look down on the world, seeing it in a hazelnut. In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian wrote in perhaps her best known passage:

*I saw that he is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us. As I saw it he is everything that is good.*

*And he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, 'It exists, both now and forever, because God loves it.' In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.*

*In this 'little thing' I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it. But what he is who is in truth Maker, Keeper, and Lover I cannot tell; for until I am essentially united with him I can never have full rest or real happiness; in other words, until I am so joined to him that there is absolutely nothing between my God and me.<sup>1</sup>*

Let us stick with the idea of the world in our hands. Of course, Julian is trying to portray an image of how God might look at his creation. It is useful that the hazelnut is pictured as being in a hand, as the hand has substantial power. The nut is removed from view by simply by making a fist around it. It can be thrown away. Or it can be brought closer to the eye of the beholder.

Julian's passage is one of reassurance and tenderness. God loves his creation and the mystic's message is that it is tenderly held in God's hand. If we think of ourselves as holding this hazelnut, being the one in authority, like the child in the sandpit mentioned earlier, we can understand the responsibility of stewardship. Having been given dominion over the earth, it is incumbent that stewardship is carried out responsibly.

Some of this responsibility lies in the nature of that over which dominion has been given. A hazelnut is fairly hardy, with an armour-like shell. Anyone who has misguidedly attempted to crack one between their teeth will know that this is not an effective method. A sturdy nutcracker or even a hammer swung on to the nutshell on a hard surface is the least force required. The kernel can be ground for culinary purposes and is used in many foods, especially sweets. It is a central ingredient of praline in some kinds of chocolate and forms the basis of the Austrian *torte*, a multi-layered cake, the ground nuts being used as an alternative to flour.

Because of its hardiness a hazelnut is a particularly apt metaphor for the world. The natural order was, for centuries, considered resilient. Humanity could make incursions into it but, if left alone, it would begin a process of recovery. Nature seemed good at renewing itself. Even major disruptions—the devastation of Flanders' fields in

the First World War being one major example—could be accommodated by the earth. If left alone, it can and does begin a process of rejuvenation.

Human endeavour has imperilled that aspect of the world. The impact of human activity on the natural order is now seen as significantly and permanently damaging and this presents us with a conundrum. If creation is an ongoing matter, and many would argue that it is, then creativity has a destructive side. Each 'advance' in modern living comes at some cost.

This reflects a deep theological and natural truth. Having been given dominion over the world, humanity acts in a seemingly God-like manner: it can build up or destroy. Much of the natural order cannot compete with the effects of sustained interference. The stewardship of natural resources requires thought, effort and management. Every human action has some aftershock, even if minimal. A walk on the grass leaves imprints, a trail of minor damage. If this is random and unsustained, there is no problem. But if a route is repeatedly used, a path soon forms and the grass dies. At first this can be helpful. Those who walk in the country can discern the right of way by the path, yet it can lead to erosion, especially on popular routes. Water will channel along the path, making it deeper, and another path is made on firmer ground to one side.

The very fact of our being alive can be instructive in understanding our impact on the world. Our breath changes the make-up of the atmosphere. Too many people breathing the same air in a confined space can lead to stuffiness, a lack of oxygen and, ultimately, suffocation.

We are more familiar with considering the impact of the motor car on the environment. Land is absorbed in the building of roads. Habitats are eradicated. Species are reduced or even made extinct. The air quality in the proximity of roads degenerates. A build-up of traffic uses more fuel, thus depleting global stocks of petroleum. How many people think of this impact when they get into the car to pop down to the shops, to collect the children from school or to go to church?

Many church leaders speak of the need to care for God's creation but this does not seem to stop building schemes that require large amounts of electricity and other resources to support the latest initiative. Many new church buildings draw on fashions in other parts of the construction industry. How many church committees try to quantify the ongoing impact of a new building in terms of its electricity consumption? Is the heating of the church building efficient? Are there methods that can minimize the overall effect on natural resources?

In some congregations success is measured by the size of the car park and how quickly it fills before a service. What would happen if such churches promoted alternative transport: walking, cycling, car pooling or public transport? Are smaller, local gatherings potentially more beneficial to a greater good?

Some churches generate a new service book for every gathering. What is the cost of this in electricity? What happens to the booklets after their use? Are they thrown away or recycled? Similar questions can be asked about provision of refreshments. Are they served in reusable or in disposable cups? Has any discussion been had over where the tea or coffee comes from? Are the producers paid a fair price for their goods?

There are personal, social and political implications in the very fact of being, and the story of creation links us to them through God. People of faith need to think through these implications. They are not easy. We cannot bluff our way past them with pat answers. Dealing with them takes thought, consideration and reflection and, for people of faith, it requires prayer.

The actions of humanity lead to many consequences for the natural world. Creation has been placed into our hands. What we do with it matters.

## Questions

1. What are the differences between the creation stories in the first chapters of the book of Genesis?
2. How does the second account inform our ideas on:
  - ❖ our place in the world?
  - ❖ our relationship with other creatures?
  - ❖ differences between the sexes?
3. What are the differences between dominion and domination?
4. In what ways can we modify our lives to reflect our views on the world?
5. Who should take responsibility for the impact of lifestyles:
  - ❖ in our home?
  - ❖ in our workplace?
  - ❖ in our church?
6. If changes could or should be made, what should take priority?

## Exercises

1. Place a hazelnut or a small stone in your hand. Feel its weight. Look at it. Close your hand around it slowly and with care. Then close your hand around the nut or stone swiftly, not unduly bothering about what happens. Does the speed of these actions affect your feelings? If so, how?
2. Carry out a waste audit. See how much you throw out:
  - ❖ at home.
  - ❖ at work.
  - ❖ from your church.
3. Read aloud the passage from Julian of Norwich in this chapter. Sit for five minutes in silence, reflecting on what she said.
4. Read the great song of creation captured in Psalm 104.

## *Prayer*

*Creator God,  
you hold us and the rest of your making in your hand.  
Your love for us dares to give into our hands  
that which you have made.  
Help us to consider the impact we have on your world.  
Challenge us to look beyond our immediate needs  
to see how we might fit into the web of your gift of life.  
We ask this through your revealed self,  
Jesus, in the sustaining life of the Spirit.  
Amen*

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### NOTES

- 1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated into modern English by Clifton Wolters, Penguin, 1966.