7th January 2018: Said Matins with Hymns
The First Sunday of Epiphany, The Baptism of Christ
Psalm 113, 1 Samuel 16: 1–3, 13, John 1: 29–34
The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

Divine Epiphanies: ‘The Hand of Blessing’

Over the next four Sundays, sermons at Matins will be based on religious objects from the Ashmolean Museum here in Oxford. Taken from the exhibition, ‘Imagining the Divine’ they represent different religious traditions during the formative centuries of the first millennium.

I’ve chosen a fragment of a sandstone human sculpture. It’s the right hand of one of the earliest larger than life standing images of the Buddha, made in Northern India in the second century AD. In the exhibition the large, expressive hand, meets you at face height. As I spent time looking at it I found the wheel in the centre of the palm, drawing me in, deeper and deeper. It gave me a sense of calm and peace, as well as a sense of dynamic movement and grace.

Perhaps that’s not surprising. The Open Hand gesture, or Abhaya-Mudra, had long been used in Indian Religions as a gesture of reassurance and safety, as a sign of divine protection and kindness, dispelling all fear and anxiety. It’s found on the Nataraja or Dancing Siva of Southern India, and is one of the classic gestures of the Buddha. One palm, or sometimes both palms raised to face the onlooker, to give blessing and peace.

The open hand gesture doubtless predates its use in religious imagery. I’m a priest in the Church of England and currently Archdeacon of Oxford. Some years ago, I spent some time with another Anglican priest who was also an Archdeacon. An Iban Tribesman by background, he ministered in Borneo, travelling mostly by river, visiting his flock.

One day I went with him to a Longhouse deep in the jungle. Decisions there were made communally and the whole tribe were wanting to be baptised. It was quite an event.

Climbing from the riverboat up a narrow pole bridge into the Longhouse, home to over 200 people and set on stilts.
Before the baptism there was formal dances of welcome to the sound of Gamelan gongs, and food with the Head Man and the rest of the community. Afterwards there was more feasting, music and dancing until dawn.

There were no chairs as such and everyone sat on the floor. For politeness, I was taught one key gesture. If you stood up and walked passed somebody still seated, it was important to walk bent over a little, and with your hands open before them, showing your open palms. The old men in the Longhouse had grown up in an age when the taking of heads from neighbouring tribes was still common.

Guests and visitors could easily be a source of danger and the open palm gesture made clear that their intentions were peaceful. In its own way, this was a gesture of reassurance, like the Abhaya-mudra of the Buddha statue. Religions have always taken things from ordinary life and imbued them with extraordinary meaning.

The Hand raised in Blessing is not a symbol unique to Buddhism of course. Christ is often depicted with a hand raised in blessing, and his open hands, marked with stigmata rather than with a wheel are familiar in our iconography. Our image of St Frideswide, here in the Cathedral, has her hands open. Open in prayer and also to receive prayers from pilgrims. At the Eucharist following this service I will convey God’s blessing to the congregation with an upraised hand. Sometimes a blessing is given with an open palm facing the people, sometimes with fingers held to convey the blessing of the Trinity or of Christ. The palm of the hand is also used to give individual blessings at the communion or elsewhere. Used always as a sign of reassurance, of God’s forgiving mercy and God’s strengthening love.

Did Christian priests carry over a practice they had seen in earlier religions? Most probably they did. Did Christian imagery use and develop religious imagery that it had seen elsewhere? Definitely so. In the Imagining the Divine Exhibition we see all faiths picking up and using imagery from local culture and from each other as they try to express the inexpressible, as they try to imagine the unimaginable. To give form and substance to things unseen, but still real.

People did not wait for the coming of Jesus to become religious, or to discover God. The human longing for the divine is as old as time itself.

As a Christian, I believe that God revealed himself completely and for all time in the person of Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection, the gift of the Spirit give us all
that is needed for our salvation, as set forth in the holy scriptures and the catholic creeds we hear and speak week by week.

But that doesn’t mean that God cannot be encountered in other faith traditions. It doesn’t mean that people of other faiths are simply deluded or misguided. If that was the case then what could be said of all the countless generations of people who lived before the birth of Christ? Was God not accessible to them? And the countless millions who grow up in cultures and situations where wholesome Christianity may not be available. Are they cut off from God’s grace, his love and his mercy? Surely not.

God reveals himself to all people and in all generations, and, we believe, uniquely in Jesus Christ. As Christians, it is our duty and our joy to share our faith with others, but also to come to them with open hands, as it were. Always with a gesture of reassurance. We come in peace and in a spirit of expectancy, to find how God has been speaking to them. Only then can we begin to share the God we see in Jesus Christ, and know through the Holy Spirit.

That doesn’t mean that all faiths are the same. They’re not. But as human beings we are all the same, born under the same sky, to live and one day to die. There is always more to learn. God is bigger than all our human attempts to define and delineate him. Always bigger than our minds or hearts can hold.

As Interfaith Adviser for the diocese I spend a lot of time with Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Sikhs, and with clergy and churches working amongst them. It is always a great privilege. Again and again I find my Christian faith is refreshed and renewed in these encounters.

As Christians we come to people of other traditions with open hands and hearts as we seek to live out our own faith to the full.

Just to finish, I wonder whether you could make your hands into two fists, clenching them tight. ….

Now relax them, opening them out….

How does that feel?

Sometimes we feel God comes to us like a fist, judging, angry, vengeful. Today’s Epiphany reminds us that God comes to us in the form of a defenceless child. A child with hands open to receive as well as to give. Today’s object reminds us that God comes to us like a hand that is open. Merciful, and ready to bless.
Fist? Or open hand?

How might we best come to Him?