

It's in my hands



by Barry Robinson

I've never paid so much attention to my hands as I have done since the COVID-19 crisis started. Washing them for 20 seconds while singing "Happy Birthday" twice, and before social distancing came in, politely declining to shake hands.

All this got me thinking: "Where did the custom of shaking hands come from in the first place?"

A popular theory suggests that extending empty hands shows that you aren't holding any weapons and that shaking hands would loosen any weapon concealed in a person's sleeves. Another theory is that the handshake was a symbol of good faith, friendship, and trust between people.

The earliest depiction of the handshake is from the 9th century BC when Assyrian King Shalmaneser III is shown shaking hands with a Babylonian king as they formed an alliance. In Ancient Greece, the joining together of right hands is shown on funeral art where dead

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people shake hands with a family member signifying a final farewell and an eternal bond. This form of handshake is also seen on ancient coins showing the bond between two cities. The English Quakers of the 17th century AD added another dimension: for them handshaking was their way of showing equality between people, rather than the stuffy bowing and curtsying of the formally structured society in which they lived.¹

I found all this history fascinating, but what really grabbed my attention is the word for "beloved friend" from the Old Testament of the Bible. Written originally in Hebrew, the word *yedid* means literally "two hands", suggesting two friends walking together while holding hands. In that culture how was friendship shown? By clasping and shaking hands. When you shake hands, no one has the upper hand. You are both equal and so true friendship can exist.²

It has taken something as dramatic and overwhelming as the coronavirus pandemic to make me realise that there really is no substitute for shaking hands. All the innovative ways we've come up with to replace it during this crisis, like bumping shoulders

or touching feet, never quite convey that feeling of warmth and friendship summed up in a handshake.

With social distancing and self-isolation, we may not be able to shake anyone's hand at the moment, but thankfully we are seeing many acts of kindness where people are figuratively holding hands with one another. This is very much in keeping with the spirit of another person from history, a Galilean preacher by the name of Jesus, who stressed the importance of giving the hungry something to eat, of giving the thirsty something to drink, and of caring for those who are ill.³

These simple acts of kindness and compassion mean so much to people. If I claim to be a follower of this Galilean preacher, then I know that these things must begin with me. It's in my hands.

NOTES

- ¹ "What are the origins of handshake? Learn the interesting history behind handshake", Facts catalogue, 28 May 2017, <https://factsc.com/history-behind-handshake/>
- ² "The meaning of the number fourteen", Rabbi Dr Hillel ben David (Greg Killian), <https://www.betemunah.org/fourteen.html>
- ³ Matthew 25:34–36, New International Version.