

Shall we dance?

II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Mark 6:14-29

Some years ago I found myself as the guest of honour at the Lehigh Presbytery in Pennsylvania. Having brought the greetings of the Church of Scotland I was invited to sit on the platform as a service was conducted. The usual hymns and prayers, and then, “As a special treat in honour of our Scottish guest, a reinterpretation of the 23rd Psalm.” I began to feel uneasy.

The tune Crimond started, and then, a Reubenesque lady (who turned out to be a belly dancer at a local Lebanese restaurant) leapt from nowhere and began to ‘reinterpret’ the 23rd Psalm, set to Crimond, through the medium of dance. There was a lot of green chiffon involved. I managed to keep a straight face. At the end of the performance the Moderator of the Presbytery, with a tear in his eye said, “Just like the old country, you must be feeling homesick.” He was half right.

Double games. Usually towards the end of November. Primary or Secondary School. Boys lined up against one wall, girls lined up on the wall opposite. An ancient record player sits on a table in the corner with a stack of LPs. Jimmy Shand featured prominently. I suspect that’s where most of us learned to dance – in the school gymnasium – to get ready for the Christmas dances.

With the ongoing success of Strictly Come Dancing, dancing is very much back on the agenda again. Several dance groups use our premises. Dance is never far from foot-loose Morningside, and I know some of you will remember your dancing days at the Plaza, or, if I am to believe from a number of stories, the slightly more risqué Silver Slipper in Spring Valley Gardens.

Dance is a powerful medium. Like good singing, and indeed good public speaking, it involves the whole body. It engages everything that we have as we move in time with the music. There is something powerful and emotional and stirring to see someone dancing well, committed to what they are doing, lost in the moment.

I wonder if that's what gripped the young king, David, in this story from the Old Testament. It is odd that David and the history writer of the books of Samuel should now suddenly remember the need to bring God into the picture. The Ark of the Covenant is remembered, that wooden box, overlaid with gold and protected by carved angels; said to contain the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments carved on them, and some Manna from the wilderness wanderings, and Aaron's rod, had been shelved for a long time. Just like God. But now, they were remembered. This new king, in his newly united country, in his new capital of Jerusalem, remembered God.

And when he remembered God, he danced. They carried the Ark of the Covenant from its temporary resting place. It was a journey not without peril. People died en route. But as they carried the Ark to Jerusalem, David danced. David danced before the Lord. Such was the excitement and the power of his faith.

God was not in the box, but the symbol of God's presence was a powerful thing for David and for the people of Israel. Looking back it meant a re-engagement with the taproot of Israel's religious vitality. David and the people get in touch with something elemental in their faith. And when God was remembered, they danced. Looking forward, the Ark's symbolism said – here is the link between what was good in the past, and what will be good in the future – the presence of God. Not an easy presence, God cannot be presumed upon, God is no tame deity, and God's holiness is not to be taken for granted or treated with familiarity. But it was a reminder to those

with eyes to see and ears to hear that God was still there. God was still with His people, even when they had gone from Him.

And David danced.

Not everyone liked David dancing. His wife thought he was making a fool of himself and not acting in the way a king should. He looked as if he was out of control. But David danced nevertheless. He danced because at that moment, the presence of God meant something to him, and his heart sang, and his body moved to the song. He knew; he felt that something new was happening in his life, and in the life of his country. So he danced. He showed his pleasure, his delight, and his faith in his dance before God.

The image of dancing is not a straightforward one in the Bible. In the Psalms, dancing is often associated with praising God. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we are told that there is a “time to mourn and a time to dance.” But in Mark’s gospel there is that Hollywood epic of a story with John the Baptist, King Herod, and Salome, with or without her seven veils. She danced not in praise of God, but in order to get for her vengeful mother the head of John the Baptist who had displeased her. Might we wonder that a point could be made about whom one is dancing for, and who is calling the tune? It was a different dance in the palace of Herod, with a different motive, and a different purpose, and it had nothing to do with praising God.

There are many forms of dance, and it seems that virtually every society you can think of has evolved the need to organise steps, patterns of movement, rhythm and touch to music. There is, most times, something inclusive about dancing. People are brought to the floor where they dance. Dance is a way in which a degree of self-expression is found – from the formality of ballet to the embarrassment of watching your parents dancing disco. Dance seeks to include and not exclude. From the moment of the first dance when the floor slowly fills, to the poignancy

and passion of the last dance of the evening, dancing is still about bringing people together. Dancing, like singing, helps us express what we feel when words of our own are not quite enough.

So David danced, with the people of Israel, before the Lord God. Here was a man who was completely open to God's power and purpose. It is almost as if he enters into a dance with God as his partner. New things are happening, and new things have yet to come.

I suspect I am probably too Presbyterian to urge you all to break out into dance in worship. Maybe that's why God created pews! But reflect on this. When last, with your movement, or with your singing, or with your saying of the Lord's Prayer, did you last really let go and let the Spirit of God fill you and your hearts in worship? Who taught us the restraint and the downcast eyes and the half-closed mouths as the appropriate way to worship the living, wonderful, tremendous God? In the dance of faith, why are we so minimal and mean?

There will always be those who choose not to join in the dance. But do we, believers in a loving, exuberant, dynamic God want to condemn ourselves to half-filled lives with faces tripping us, refusing to let go a little, be glad for others, and enter into the spirit of things, enter into God's Spirit? David sang, and wrote poetry, and played a harp, and he also **danced!**

David danced before the Lord with all his might. Appropriate to that time, David let his love of God and his belief in God and his trust in God and his hope in God fill him and take over, for that moment, his whole life. And he danced; he danced with all his might.

I believe we are called, as followers of Jesus Christ, to enter into the dance of faith. Sometimes it may be slow and stately; sometimes it may be measured and dignified; sometimes it may be joyful and exuberant. But at all times, the dance of faith calls us to partner with our fellow

worshippers, and with God, as we weave our way through many steps, including all who will join us, and call in from the margins of life those who think they're wallflowers, but have as much right to dance as do we.

In our worship, in all our worship, may your hearts dance, your eyes dance, your smiles dance. Like David, shall we dance for the glory and love of our living God?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen