

Are you dancing?

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

Picture the scene. A school gymnasium, a Wednesday afternoon in the 1970s. It's November. It's already dark outside. It's double games. In one of those rare occasions when the boys' and girls' PE teachers work together, the boys and girls are brought together. Boys stand shiftily on one side of the gym; girls sit on the low benches provided for them on the other side. Both groups looking and not looking at each other at the same time. Then the rush when it was announced to take a partner to make sure you weren't the last one left who would have to dance with a teacher. Does it bring back memories – the preparations for the school Christmas dance? The introduction to the mysteries of the Gay Gordons, the St Bernard's Waltz, the Dashing White Sergeant, and most complex of all, the Eightsome Reel. Allemande, slip-step, pas-de-basque. "One, two and graciously descend from your toes and no vulgar stamping; it's a waltz, not elephantine terpsichore", was one of the more memorable phrases the Games Mistress used. I suspect it's where most Scottish school children learned to dance.

With the ongoing success of *Strictly Come Dancing*, dancing is very much back on the agenda, or will be one you can get closer to your partner than 6'7" (that's 2 metres in old money for the young people). Several dance groups long to get back to using our halls. I know some of you may remember your dancing days at the Morningside Plaza, or, if I am to believe 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 when we see someone dancing well, committed to what they are doing, lost in the moment. 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 in community, where there is both the freedom to move, and the set formats to move in. Dancing often, like singing, helps us express what we feel when words on their own are not quite enough. A wife dancing with her husband on their wedding day. A father dancing with his infant

son trying to get them to stop crying. A husband dancing with his dementia-lost wife, where music and intimacy and movement connect the frayed wires of her memory for a moment and, once more, she is in the room with him. It is no surprise that one of the 20th's greatest dancers, Rudolf Nureyev said, "You live as long as you dance."

I wonder if that's what gripped the young King David in this story from the Old Testament? By this time in his maverick story much has happened to him. The in his story much has happened. The obscure, unnamed shepherd boy, the eighth son of no consequence, called by God, anointed by Samuel, preparing for his unexpected leadership, triumphant over Goliath, successful in battle, now finds himself the King of Israel, with the power and the blessing of God. It is a complete transformation.

Seeking to unite his barely cohesive kingdom, David remembers the forgotten Ark of the Covenant, and brings it to his recently captured city of Jerusalem, named, with more than a little hubris, the City of David.

The Ark of the Covenant, the talisman of ancient Israel. The wooden box overlaid with gold and with two carved angels, said to contain the stone tablet on which were written the Ten Commandments, Aaron's priestly rod, and some manna from the wilderness wanderings. More familiar today through the film the Raiders of the Lost Ark. The Ark, the symbol of Israel's faith and the reminder of God's raw, continuing presence in their midst. Forgotten for twenty years, David brings it back into the centre of things, connecting Israel's ancient faith to the new dynasty David was founding. Forgotten, but now remembered. This new king, in his newly united country, remembered God. And when David remembered God, he danced.

David danced before the Lord. Such was the excitement and the power of his faith, that he danced. The presence of God, the real presence, moved people to pray, and to sing, and sometimes to dance.

Not everyone liked David dancing. His wife Michal, a daughter of the defeated King Saul, thought David was making of 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. David broke away from any sedate royal pose he might have assumed and dances for sheer joy in the presence of his God. He was

unabashed. "I will make merry before the Lord", he said, whatever people might think or feel. And he danced.

Here was a man who was completely open to God's power and purpose, and such was the strength of his faith, and the trust in his heart, that he could show what he believed. 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.

The image of dancing in the Bible is not straightforward. The Psalms associate it with praising God. Ecclesiastes tells us, "there is a time to mourn and a time to dance." In Mark's Gospel, when Salome, with our without her seven veils, dances in Herod's Palace, and asks for the head of John the Baptist who had displeased her mother, the motive of the dance was vengeance, and nothing to do with God.

But David, in the presence of God, and for joy in God, danced.

When the regulations are removed in our locked down nation, I suspect we will all be too Presbyterian to encourage the breaking out of dancing at a service. But can you remember when last, in worship, with the tunes and songs you know, you really let go and let the Spirit of God fill you, your hearts, your eyes, your mouths. Gone was the severe restraint and the downcast eyes and the half-closed mouths. Who, in the dance of our faith, told us to be so minimal and mean? The Church has rarely been at the forefront of enthusiasm for dance. The Puritans banned it in the C17th believing it inflamed morality. Victorians were scandalised by the lasciviousness of the waltz. In the 1920s Pope Pius X declared the tango sinful.

But David, in the presence of, and for the joy in the Lord, danced. David, the harpist, the musician, the music writer, danced. He let his belief and trust and hope in God fill him and take over, for that moment, his whole life. And he danced. He danced with all his might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

We are called as followers of Jesus to enter into the dance of faith. Sometimes it may be slow and stately, measured and dignified. Sometimes it may be joyful and exuberant. But at all times the dance of faith calls us to partner with those around us, and with God, as we weave our way

through many steps. Calling in those who may think they are 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 spirits dance, for the love you have for the living, loving, present God.

Are you dancing? Who's asking? God's asking. I'm dancing.

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

Amen