

Pentecost 6 Year B

The dance of the Lord

Readings: 2 Sam. 6: 1 – 5, 12b – 19

Psalm 24

Ephesians 1: 3 – 14

Mark 6: 14 – 29

“Dance then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance said he;
and I’ll lead you all wherever you may be,
and I’ll lead you all in the dance, said he.”

These words to the hymn we just sung and the tune itself is very catchy. It actually makes me feel like dancing. I like dancing, particularly with my grandchildren. If you ask Tangi or anyone else in my family, they will tell you. There has hardly been a day when I haven’t danced with Ananiah and Kimi. I might look silly, but it brings a smile and joy to the ones I love.

Who enjoys dancing? When the music is good, especially a favourite, and you and those around you are feeling happy, you can’t help, sometimes, but want to move and express your joy. It’s hard to sit still and quite when you are so happy. You might want to smile or laugh or sing or dance or do all of them and all at once. When you are

so happy, dancing can be very spontaneous. In a sense, you might let yourself go where your imagination is free to express itself.

But dancing as an expression of one's self can also be more purposeful rather than just spontaneous. Dancing in many cultures is choreographed. Movements have meaning and, ultimately, they tell a story or convey a message. And like any form of communication, those who receive the message or the dance must also make sense of it; they interpret it. Therefore, a dance can impact the audience and evoke a response.

Think about the haka that the All Blacks perform. It's not just about a sense of identity and tradition. It's also about letting the opposition know that they mean business on the rugby field. The hope is that the opposition will perhaps feel intimidated and be put off their game.

When I dance for my grandchildren, my granddaughter Ananiah usually dances as well and Kimi smiles and waves his hands. By dancing I try to show them how happy I am for them; and they seem to reciprocate.

Apart from his military victories, some of the well-known Bible stories of David include his dancing. After recently securing Jerusalem as his new place of residence and uniting the tribes of

Israel, David now needs to consolidate his power in this new place. The Ark of the Covenant that had been returned by the Philistines after a series of disasters the ark inflicted upon them while in their possession (1 Sam. 6:1-7:2). Since its return, the ark remained at the house of Abinadab who lived in the village of Kiriath-jearim near Jerusalem (1 Sam. 7:1). As a symbol of God's presence and ultimate power, David now sought to relocate it in Jerusalem.

So important was this event that 30, 000 were chosen to ensure the success of the Ark's transition. It seemed a most joyful occasion (v.12) in which David and the people danced before the Lord with all their might (vv.5, 14).

But why is dancing so central in this story? Maybe it was a response of spontaneous and uncontrollable joy. Since the act of sacred dancing, to the accompaniment of musical instruments, was associated with early Israelite prophecy (1 Sam. 10: 5, 10) it may simply be that David and his followers were seized by a spirit of prophetic excitement.

But maybe, David choreographed it in such a way as that his dance was telling another story. David's dancing before the ark as it is transferred to Jerusalem, now also called the city of David, points to a pivotal transfer of political power. Theologically, it could also be a

transformation of God's power in relation to power public power. David's intense personal involvement is either a genuine recognition and honouring of true power in the Lord (represented by the ark) or a manipulation of religious symbols for the sake of his own enhanced power.

The audience, including us, will respond depending on how the dance is interpreted. According to the story (v.5), "all the house of Israel" joined David in the dance. Perhaps it was a response signalling their support of him as their king. Maybe it was public or peer pressure to be involved. Whether the people wanted to or not and whether they agreed with David or not, their dance was a collective response in the way the new monarchy was now shaping itself.

But not everyone joined in the dance. Michal, David's wife and daughter of King Saul, seeing David dance "despised him in her heart" (v.16). It's not clear why she responded this way, but maybe she perceived something about David that the rest do not. Maybe she perceived that the one who danced to honour the Lord actually did so to honour himself by influencing a situation, by manipulating the joy of the people to secure his own interests. Whatever her real reasons, the writer clearly contrasts the joy of the people with the contempt of Michal. And even if David did have an agenda for what he did, for the writer, again, it all happened within the bigger picture of what

God was doing in the life of God's people. The dance of David and the people is part of what God was doing.

From Mark's Gospel there is story that also involves a dance. Similarly, it was a dance used as part of a manipulation of a situation. A dance by Herodias's daughter impressed Herod Antipas so much that he promised to give whatever she asked of him (Mk. 6:23). After consulting with her mother, the young girl asked for John's head on a platter. The manipulation was not in the dance, but of the joy of the one in the audience.

But the point of this story in Mark is not about the dance that led to the death of God's servant; rather, it is, in my way of thinking, about the part that people play in the bigger dance or performance of God's work in the world. Mark places this story between the mission of the Twelve (Mk. 6:6b-13) and their report to Jesus of the successful mission (6:30). John as forerunner for Jesus did what he had to do. His life and ministry paralleled that of Jesus' in many ways – their birth being foretold, they both had disciples, they both suffered at the hands of a political figure and they both died for speaking the truth. Our epistle reading from Ephesians clearly identifies our relationship with God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The relationship of the Trinity is one that has been described as perichoresis, derived from a Greek word from which we get the word

choreography for dance. This means that the relationship of the Trinity is like a dance in which they move with and through each other to fulfil themselves and their purpose. Therefore, the mission of God is a dance that seeks to fulfil God's purpose in the world.

As Christians, as the church and as God's people, we are part of God's mission and, therefore, part of the dance of the Lord. We are dancers or performers on God's stage, but what we do is not a mere show or entertainment. What we do or how we dance is still important because we want to have an effect; we want to convey something; we have a message or a story to tell. It's important also because like Michal, Herod Antipas and John the Baptist, our dance can affect or impress on people. It can, in some way, make a difference for people. That difference may cause others to join our dance; it may make them despise us and what we do or it may result in our suffering.

But, the show must go on even when we do not like the tune to which we dance. Not everyone appreciates God's music or songs. Not everyone likes music or songs about God. Yet, we must perform the gospel story of God love even when people do not accept our invitation to the dance floor. Whatever the religious symbols or methods we use, we dance with the hope that the power and authority of God's love and grace is established and realised in people's lives.

God is the Lord of the dance despite our selves. We may not be that great at dancing for the gospel and perhaps move around as if we have two left feet and go around in circles with our church work. We might even keep stepping on other people's toes even though we try hard to be helpful in our Christian service. We may even have poor hearing to God's music that causes us to be out of touch or irrelevant in the way we witness for Christ. Despite all these things, we are part of God's show. Regardless of our own inadequacies, dancing to God's music in God's show can still be a joyful experience and response. It can be joyful instead of miserable because we know this love ourselves as children of God.

Try dancing with your family. It doesn't matter if you think you look silly. What matters is that you bring smiles and joy to those you love because God loves them too. Amen.