

## **TRINITY 7 YEAR B – 15<sup>th</sup> JULY 2018**

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Mark 6:14-29

It can only be a matter of two or three weeks now before we get the annual drip-feed of news about who the celebrities are going to be on Strictly Come Dancing this year. I will admit I am a big fan of Strictly, and its arrival in the autumn is a welcome way to bring a bit of sparkle to colder, darker evenings. It has a feel-good factor about it, suitable for young, old and in-betweens to watch.

But Strictly also seems to have a darker side. The glitz and the glamour of the spray tans and the dresses inevitably gives way, year after year, to rumours (quite often substantiated) of the so-called 'curse of Strictly' – the way that personal relationships, perhaps already in difficulty, are strained to breaking-point and beyond, as the celebrities and their dancing pros become ever closer.

Of course, that kind of difficulty is not just a feature of Strictly. It can happen in any situation where one partner is suddenly immersed in a new experience and a new, close relationship. But it's a very public stage on which to have your personal life exposed, and it must be particularly humiliating for the non-dancing partner or spouse, unintentionally the subject of media attention at one of life's cruellest moments.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today are, of course, both about dances. One is a lewd, provocative dance, used as a weapon. And, on the face of it, the other is an exuberant celebration praising God. But all is not quite as it seems and they deserve closer examination.

So let's start with the easier one to categorise – the lewd one.

Such is the exotic imagery of the dance which entraps the drunken Herod Antipas that, over time, it has become known as the Dance of the Seven Veils. From other sources we know that Herodias' daughter Salome is the girl who drives her lustful stepfather to make his rash promises. But what else do we know about these characters?

To answer that, we have to look back to King Herod the Great – the Herod of the Christmas story, who felt so threatened by the infant Jesus that he had all baby boys of a similar age put to the sword in an attempt to kill him. Two of Herod the Great's sons, by different wives and therefore half-brothers to each other, were Herod Antipas and Herod Philip. Still another of his sons, whom he had executed, was the father of Herodias. So Herodias was granddaughter of Herod the Great and niece of both Antipas and Philip.

Herodias married Philip and it was their daughter who was Salome. Later, Herodias divorced Philip and married Herod Antipas, who had also divorced his first wife in order to marry her. So this was a family which intermarried extensively and had little regard for marital vows, let alone religious convention or the rule of law.

Of course, we have to be careful not to judge a 1<sup>st</sup>-century situation with 21<sup>st</sup>-century morals and sensibilities. Back then, women were regarded as the property of men in a way that seems out-of-date to us. But the behaviour of the Herod family in this story still stands out for its wickedness. It's not only Biblical sources which imply that the wrongdoing is as much down to Herodias as it is to Herod Antipas. She seems to have engineered her divorce from Philip and her remarriage to his half-brother, so we can't categorise her as the victim here. And, whatever her story, deliberately to get her own daughter to dance so provocatively in front of her husband seems not to be normal maternal behaviour.

Salome is the victim of Herodias' plotting in this situation. And the way Mark and the other Gospel writers relate this episode tells us that this is deeply shocking. You get the impression the Herod family is as morally bankrupt as the Roman emperors we see portrayed in 'I Claudius' or even the Borgia family of the Middle Ages.

Of course, the reason for the behaviour in this specific episode is very clear. John the Baptist has condemned the marriage of Herodias and Herod Antipas as unlawful. And if Herod has any inclination to listen to John and change things, and the indications are that he might, Herodias is having none of it. A divorce from Herod would mean a loss of status, power and riches for her. So John has to be removed in the most graphic way possible, as a warning to his disciples, even if that means compromising her own daughter.

Now let's step back further, about 1200 years before the birth of Christ, to the time of King David, God's anointed one. Our Old Testament reading describes in thrilling terms the way that David brings the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem, with dancing and music and celebratory sacrifices. This exuberant expression of joy epitomises David's close relationship with God – can you imagine what it must be like to leap and dance with all your might?

Yet look slightly closer at this passage and there are a couple of more sinister things going on.

The first concerns the way in which David fetches the Ark. Notice he takes 30,000 men with him to bring it from the household of Abinadab. That's because

it has resided there for twenty years and David is expecting a fight to get it. Abinadab was one of the sons of King Saul, so David is consolidating his own position as King by taking the Ark away. Our reading today omits a few rather important verses in which Uzzah, the cart driver, is struck down dead when he touches the Ark. From this incident, David realises that if the Ark is kept where his Kingdom is based, God's power will reside there with him – and, by inference, he will be invincible.

The second sinister thing relates to his wife, Michal, who despises him for his dancing. Further on in the chapter, she remonstrates with him in a sarcastic, waspish way, saying:

How the king of Israel honoured himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself! (I Samuel 6:20b)

Her specific complaint seems to be that he took off his royal robe and danced in a linen ephod – a religious garment. The equivalent today would be the Dean removing his fanciest cope and dancing in the aisle in his black cassock – not that much to be worked up about, surely? But make no mistake – this is nothing to do with garments or dancing. It's entirely to do with the way David has treated Michal.

Michal's father Saul offered her to David in marriage but David couldn't pay the bride price that was common practice at the time – so Saul asked him to kill 100 Philistines. David did better than this and killed 200, and so the wedding took place.

Unusually, we can see that Michal loved David and even risked her own life to help him escape when her father was trying to kill him. But David abandoned her, and Saul promptly married her to someone else. When David later decided he wanted Michal back, having taken other wives in the meantime, his attitude was one of entitlement - he had killed 200 Philistines for her hand, after all.

Many things have changed in the last 3,200 years, but human nature isn't one of them. And the old adage about hell having no fury like a woman scorned seems to apply here! As the story of David continues, we see that although his relationship with God is one of the closest in the Bible, his weakness is the ladies, as the misdemeanour over taking Bathsheba as his wife later bears out.

David's dance, although joyful and spirit-filled, belies the fact that behind the scenes there is a real domestic drama playing out. In public he is having a party, but his wife Michal is dying inside.

So, two dances – one sacred, one profane. And two scorned women.

One dance is motivated by the guile and wickedness of a woman from an evil family who is rightly condemned by God's prophet for her loose morals and manipulative ways. The other is a dance of jubilation, which God accepts as rightful worship, yet behind the scenes watches a woman who has been personally and publicly humiliated by the dancer – the very King God has appointed over Israel.

Dance, and all the expressive arts, are God-given and have the capacity to lift our spirits to him, whether as participants or as members of the audience. They can take us beyond words to a place which is completely absorbing and timeless, immersive and freeing at one and the same time. And yet our experience of them is inevitably conditioned by the fact that we are only human. For all the time and effort we put into perfecting our skills, any piece of art only shows one facet of what is going on within us in that very moment. We aspire to show ourselves at our best, but human beings have many sides, and not all of them are filled with colour and light.

If that sounds rather despondent, I think there is a better place for me to finish – with someone talking about dancing who, I suspect, probably never experienced doing so. She was Mechtild from Magdeburg, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Beguine – someone who didn't take holy orders, but still shut herself away in a convent-like situation for all her adult life. She was the first mystic to write in the German language.

Mechtild speaks of a dance with God in eternity which we can only begin to imagine here on earth. Only in heaven will we truly dance to God's choreography. So, while part of me would love to learn how to foxtrot in a sparkly frock like they do on *Strictly Come Dancing*, actually it's this dance that I really want to master, and I commend it to you:

I cannot dance, O Lord,  
unless you lead me.  
If you will  
that I leap joyfully  
then you must be the first to dance  
and to sing!

Then, and only then,  
will I leap for joy.

Then will I soar  
from love to knowledge,  
from knowledge to fruition,  
from fruition to beyond  
all human sense.

And there  
I will remain  
and circle for evermore.