



BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

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Pentecost 8 (Mark 6.14-29)

Blessing or curse?

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In this NAIDOC Week, I honour first nations peoples who dance and sing up country, who know the power of movement in ritual. And in contrast, I think of the political dances going on around the world, in Australia, the US, the UK, South Africa, France.. dances of power and intrigue.

Today's reflection focuses on two stories, both involving dance. In one, a man dances with abandon as part of ritual and his wife does not approve. In the second, a woman dances as part of the entertainment and her stepfather and his friends love it. Her mother uses the opportunity to have an enemy murdered.

Observe the dances, and the dancers, of course, but more than that, see the dances as pointing to the way we lead our lives and interact with others. There is politics and power and scheming and perhaps innocence, all embodied in these two stories, resonant with what's going on today. I choose these two stories because they are the readings set for the day, and coincidentally, they offer an opportunity for me to reflect on my time in Bali where I learnt two dances, one, part of a temple ritual, usually done by men, and the other, also a traditional dance, this one done by women.

Let's see what strands come together in these two stories and where they diverge.

First, in 2 Samuel in the Hebrew scriptures (2 Samuel 6.1-5, 6.12b-19), King David dances. He dances wearing a simple loincloth, dances as the ark of the covenant is brought back home. He dances to praise God, dances in celebration, in Community with all the instruments playing. When the ceremony is over he blesses the people and provides food for everyone. But his wife, his first wife, the daughter of King Saul, the king who has tried to kill David many times, hates what she sees and despises her husband.

Some of the backstory is that she had loved David, and her father saw some political expedience in getting David killed for her sake. He asked David for the foreskins of 100 Philistines as the dowry for his daughter's hand in marriage. David rose to the occasion and was not killed himself but killed the required number of people. Lovely story. Michal and David marry. Awhile later Saul took her back again for a season. We don't really know why, it is all politics, but now she seems to hate David and sees his behaviour as totally inappropriate. I would like to hear more from her.

This is just a snippet of David and Michal's story.

There feels like a certain amount of naïveté on David's part, but in this story he dances to bless.

Offer and bless.

One thing that struck me about Bali was the small offerings I found everywhere: on the pavement, outside shops, in houses, at shrines, little offerings of flowers and food, offerings made before a meal, before welcoming strangers, and these were a blessing, a reminder of something more, a

reminder of presence, a reminder, and for me, an invitation to be a blessing, an offering in each moment of the day. I was fortunate to attend several ceremonies in peoples' homes where they made offerings, sprinkled water, lit incense, ate three grains of rice and put grains of rice on their foreheads, after being sprinkled with water themselves and blessed. These rituals remind me of some Christian ritual.

During one ceremony I attended, simultaneously there were people chanting sacred scriptures while others were doing sacred dances and still others were making offerings at their altars. It was serious. There were some masked comedic characters playing with the audience, dancing, and telling sacred stories, all while the scriptures were being chanted and offerings being made. It was a holistic gathering. Some young girls danced, some older women danced. Some professional men danced. Our group danced the sacred dance we had learned and people were tickled by it. Dance was integral to the ceremony. This embodied ritual went on for hours and hours. It was at the same time serious and delightful. Young children wandered round filming much of it on mobile phones.

So now we come back to our scripture stories, to the unmasking that dance offers. Like music it goes underneath the radar, underneath the left brain function and lets other emotions and intentions arise.

David dances, bringing home the symbol of God's presence, the ark of the Covenant and he dances ecstatically. His wife, Michal, disdains him for whatever reason. Maybe she doesn't like what he's wearing or not wearing. Maybe she is still aligned to her father, we don't know. Maybe she has a different sense of decorum and what is proper. David dances, offers, blesses and feeds the gathered assembly. It is a ritual ceremonial act and the fruits are blessing for his people. Who are the David's today? and Michal?

In our reading from Mark, a young woman dances at a party, part of the entertainment. Historian Josephus calls her Salome. Who knows what dance she did, no doubt it was part of the repertoire, something beautiful and lithe. I imagine her young body blossoming with the attention, or maybe not, but she seemed to have that charisma which attracted the attention of all in the room. And her stepfather/uncle was delighted, and overflowing with the success of the party, offers her the earth, up to half of his kingdom, never guessing that his largesse would end in a gruesome death. But his bonhomie exposed him and no way did he want to lose face. Reluctantly he ordered the deed done, John killed and offered on a platter. His lover, Herodius presumably was satisfied that her detractor was no more.

The context of this interpolated narrative is that people are wondering who Jesus is. It is a transitional story, a story that points forward to Jesus and his particular role. Herod won't meet Jesus until just before Jesus' death, though Herod was dying to meet him because he is intrigued, enticed, as he was with John. He named Jesus 'John raised from the dead'.

There's a lot about power in these stories, and how it is used. The players in this gospel story are Herod, his guests, his stepdaughter, and his lover/wife Herodias. We and Jesus are in the background.

Each has a part to play and each has some influence on the course of events and their meaning: John the Baptist was true to himself, to his values, taking on the risky business of criticising power. He died senselessly before his time, yet, he did the spadework to prepare for Jesus.

'The Baptisteer beckons us to reckon with what it means to divest ourselves in the service of Christ without becoming diminished, without giving up the self that God created,'¹ says Jan Richardson.

Then we have Herod, son of Herod the Great, who, no doubt was doing his best, caught up in ego, a nasty piece of work. His evening of blessing became curse. What about his niece/stepdaughter, dancing and bowing to her mother's wishes. Blessing and curse. Who is she and what is her future? And Herod's lover/wife, Herodias who asks for her detractor's death. I wonder how Herod and Herodias relationship goes from here? Do they grow closer or further apart? Blessing or curse?

Steve Garnaas-Holmes puts it this way:

Two dances: one [for entertainment], yet praised; the other an honest act of prayer, yet scorned. One is entangled in secret desires and schemes, in bitterness and revenge; the other is free and simple. One dancer reveals too much joy, too much of himself; the other reveals too much fear, too much of the palace's corruption. One dance is caught up in calculations for getting what one wants; the other is a pure gift. One is designed to please others; the other is offered without regard to what others think. One is a coin passed through many hands; the other is a song sung once.

And here's the rub: the one that becomes murderous is the one that fits in, that follows the rules, that functions as an acceptable tool of those in power. It's the dance of the system. The one that is pure worship, the dance of the heart, becomes a scandal.

Pure love never fits in. It exposes us, makes us look foolish. It comes from a place where who we are, our naked self, is lovely, and offered without reservation. It breaks rules, and it often evokes resistance. Fitting in to get what we want is usually rewarded, often by something no less awful than exactly what we wanted. And then by being used by someone else for what they want.

You're going to dance. The question is not whether, or even how. It's why.

May God give you both good reason and courage to dance.²

Bless or curse?

I dance. I dance to bless and to express, to release and to understand.

My intention is to bless others and bless God. Being loved and loving in return is an embodied business. I only know through my body. The whole of life is dance. Like meditation, dance goes beyond words and invites us to the centre of what things actually mean. Look at David. Look at Salome.

Jan Richardson offers this blessing:

May your life be a river.
May you flow with the purpose
of the One who created
and called you,
who directs your course

¹ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/07/08/the-river-of-john/>

² <https://unfoldinglight.net/2012/07/13/1342/> Steve Garnaas-Holmes

and turns you ever
toward home.

May your way shimmer
with the light of Christ
who goes with you
who bears you up
who calls you by name.

May you move
with the grace of the Spirit
who brooded over
the face of the waters
at the beginning
and who will gather you in
at the end³

May the God who dances in creation, who embraces us with human love, who shakes our lives like
thunder, bless us and drive us out with power to fill the world with her justice. Amen.⁴ *Janet
Morley*

³ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/07/08/the-river-of-john/>

⁴ Janet Morley, in *Earth Gospel, A Guide to Prayer for God's Creation*