

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

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

During these months of COVID and social distancing, I wonder when did you last dance? Perhaps, with someone in your bubble? A rather cool quote that is attributed, or misattributed, to Albert Einstein notes, “we dance for laughter, we dance for tears, we dance for madness, we dance for fears, we dance for hopes, we dance for screams, we are the dancers, we create the dreams.” That’s cool, right? American modern dancer and choreographer Martha Graham once pointed out that, “dance is the hidden language of the soul.” These words appear to denote the two dances we heard from today’s readings. They are the dance of David, and the dance of Salome, the step-daughter of Herod.

Let us first take a look at the dance of David: the dance of peace.

From his psalms, we can sense that David was a forthright and sincere man who was not afraid to let his true feelings known. And so, we are not really surprised when he showed his great joy at the return of the ark of the Lord by leaping and dancing. For the Israelites, having the ark safely placed in Jerusalem was very meaningful and important.

If we go back a bit in the story, we would discover that in a battle with the Philistines earlier on, Israel was defeated and lost several thousand men. And so, the Israelites sent for the ark of the Lord. They thought that this way, their victory would be guaranteed. For them, carrying the ark to battle would mean having God among them and on their side. Perhaps, they paid too much attention to upkeeping a faithful outward appearance, but forgot about their spiritual life and their personal relationship with their God? Anyway, the result of that battle was disastrous. The Israelites were defeated. The ark fell into enemy hands. The glory had departed from Israel. The ark of the Lord, and indeed the Lord Himself, must not be regarded as some kind of good luck charm or mascot. Anyway, something or someone that one would remember only in times of need. The people of Israel learned their lesson the hard way.

Now that David ultimately got the ark of the Lord delivered to Jerusalem, he had it set in its place. This meant that to a certain extent, threats from foreign enemies were much diminished. It also signified the establishment of a proper religious order among the Israelites. The people could now go to the holy city to

“appear before the Lord” (Deuteronomy 16:16), according to the Mosaic law, on religious feast and festivals, to ritually celebrate the deliverance of Israel and the provision of the Lord their God.

The returning of the ark also meant that the country’s internal turmoil was more or less stamped out. The order of daily life was gradually being built. The nation was no longer divided, but was finally entering into a period of peace and prosperity under the reign of King David. And so, David rejoiced. Not because he was successful in uniting the divided kingdoms, but most importantly, because the Lord his God was glorified. In pious enthusiasm, he leapt and danced before the Lord. Divested of his royal mantle, and girded with a linen ephod, David’s dance was done as an act of religious homage. An act that was symbolic of penitence, joy, thankfulness and devotion. The way he dressed and acted might not befit a king, but all he was concerned about, was the glory of God and the establishment of a new order. For this reason, we can describe David’s dance as the dance of peace.

Let us now turn to the second dance: the dance of Salome, the dance of desire.

Salome was the daughter of Herodias. She was not named in the gospels, but her name was recorded by first century Jewish historian Josephus. Many renaissance paintings depicted Salome as the symbol of desire, since her dancing made a king promise her half of his kingdom. Herod was made king of the Jews by the Romans, but he also inherited Jewish heritage. He knew that prophets should be respected. And so, when John the Baptist told off Herod for marrying his brother’s wife Herodias while her husband was still alive, he had him imprisoned. But he protected him. And when he heard John’s words, he was greatly perplexed. Still, he liked to listen to him. Herod did not want him killed because he knew that he was a righteous and holy man. From this, we can know that Herod was a self-contradictory person. And the disagreement between him and John the Baptist arose because of chaotic relationships in his family. Just like peace is associated with order, desire is linked with chaos.

It was not that Herod did not know about righteousness, but he was swayed because of weakness in his character. He might know that something was right, but he could not make himself do it. His life was dominated by desire. We cannot deny that sometimes, desire could be a positive motivation in life, as it might impel people to seek higher achievements. However, when a person’s self is pegged to desire, then that person’s life would become unavoidably chaotic.

But how do these two dances apply to us? The dance of peace requires us to let go of self, so that we would not be taken over by our desire. It is easy to be led by our desire and allow it to take priority in our lives. Peace is to let go of our ego while targeting at a higher value set in God. This way we may step away from the demands of our ego and live in the order of freedom and peace. What desire brings is but temporary satisfaction. Whether this would lead to glory or shame, benefits or loss, one thing is sure. It could easily cast us into bondage that would deprive us of control. Sometimes, it might even cause us to fall. Herod was such an example. While he knew that having John the Baptist killed was not right, he was bound by his own thoughtless promise made in desire. He had to keep his words, and had to do what he should not do and was unwilling to do.

If we look at these dances from a Christian viewpoint, we can reach the conclusion that the dance of peace requires selfless giving, in the quest for higher meanings in life. In fact, this is a life that focuses on living out values that is more than selfish, personal interest. It is a life devoted to search for and live according to God's will. This is the beginning of spiritual life! Comparatively speaking, the other dance, the dance of desire, is egocentric and seeks mainly to please and satisfy oneself. Both are dances of life, but lead to totally different ends.

"The journey between who you once were, and who you are now becoming, is where the dance of life really takes place" (Barbara De Angelis). We face different choices in our lives. We might choose to dance the dance of peace. We might carelessly give ourselves over to dance the dance of desire. We might choose order, or we might choose chaos. We might choose freedom, or unwittingly choose bondage. And in the process of making choices, we must not forget that we have been chosen by God in Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ has given himself, before choosing us to participate in his giving, in order to enable us to live out the strength of our faith. May God, our Lord of the dance of life, bless and keep us in our choices, that we may choose to dance the dance of life that pleases him. Amen.