

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

The theme I would like to draw from today's readings is dance and dancing. How many people here danced as a child? How many continued to dance into adulthood? How many danced for their wedding, or at another person's wedding? How did the dance make you feel – joy, excitement, energy, romance perhaps? Dancing exposes the inner soul through the joy of movement and music. It's easy for children to dance. Children are much less inhibited than adults. Very young children aren't concerned, like many older children, teenagers and adults, that others are looking at the dance and seeing vulnerability in the freedom expressed. It's ok to be vulnerable when one is a child because we are not aware of the vulnerability. However, it is much harder to be confident in the dance when childhood is passed.

There are many different types of dance which have been practised around the world since ancient times. I think some cultures are less inhibited about dancing than many westerners. Traditional European dance costumes are brightly coloured and extravagantly decorated while Aboriginal dancers wear very little clothing and adorn their bodies in paint. There is ballet, line dancing, Irish dancing, tap dancing, ball dancing, Flamenco dance, hip hop, acro... the list goes on.

I like to reflect on the dance my rottweiler dog had when she was a puppy. Louka was a terribly naughty pup – and judging from the demolition of my broccoli crop this last week, continues in her naughtiness. Louka's dance is defiant. She began to dance last week when I chased her around the garden with my upended broccoli, desperate to throw it at her in my despair. Louka knows that if she dances around the garden I will have to try and catch her, and she knows I won't be able to do it. And so, she dances even harder.

I wonder how people reacted to the dance of David and the house of Israel in the reading we've heard from the book of Samuel. David danced wildly before the Lord. His ecstasy was matched with his scanty dress, a mere linen cloth. Michal, the daughter of Saul, mocked David for his dance, scorned him for his near nakedness.

You can read on about her reaction in chapter six of 2 Samuel. It is the scorn of others that causes most of us to not want to dance with freedom in our souls.

Was David's dance meant to cause offence? Was it more like my dog's dance of defiance rather than a dance intended to honour God? It's hard to work through some of these stories and get to the real meaning. David was a complex character, chosen by God, even as he behaved at times in dishonourable ways. As to his dance, perhaps we might leave it with the Lord as an offering of joy, a further sacrifice to the Lord and an offering of well-being – and something outrageous.

There is another dance in today's selection of readings. This dance is far more sinister than the wild and uncontrolled dancing of David. In the gospel of Mark king Herod pays the price for his association with the revolutionary John the Baptist. And a very carefully contrived dance provides the means for an ugly revenge to take place.

Many of us have heard this gospel passage before. Yet at each new hearing it ought to evoke a sense of discomfort in us. This dance reminds us that human beings are capable of dreadful things, that any opportunity may provide an excuse for violent retribution.

The child Herodias danced for her father's birthday party. Clearly, she was an accomplished entertainer. Dancing was a regular accompaniment to social functions in the ancient world – no digital entertainment in those days – people relied on the talents of those close to them. The death of John the Baptist cannot be blamed on the dancing daughter Herodias. Her dance was a tool for her mother to use against the king because he had listened to the prophecy of John and she was seeking a way to get rid of him. Even in prison it seemed John's words were influential. Herod feared him and tried to protect him from harm. But Herod was not wise enough to evade entrapment. Should he have denied the request of his daughter then others would have been waiting to pounce, perceiving an opportunity of weakness which could lead to the king's downfall and their own ascension to power and greatness. And so, in an even worse version of weakness he conceded to the beheading of John.

As beautifully as the daughter Herodias may have danced, the intent of the mother to use the dance as an excuse for violent action made the dance grotesque – as grotesque as the image of the head of the prophet the girl carried on a platter to her mother.

People so often look for an excuse to enact violence, to impose their will when it is frustrated from being fulfilled. Rarely do people like their behaviour challenged, as John the Baptist challenged King Herod and the mother Herodias. So often challenges provide people with excuses to behave badly, to do violence on themselves and on others. How quickly do we forget the greatness of our efforts to work together, to overcome the challenges of our differences and achieve remarkable outcomes, as we have seen in the way the experts in countries around the world have developed vaccines to save people from the scourge of the current pandemic. The greatest efforts can be seen in the giving of vaccines to economically poorer countries, knowing that many lives may be saved. People long to hear good news, yet how much more are we inundated with violent stories instead?

It's hard to understand how things which exist as challenges, such as living alongside people with different cultures and beliefs, can be used as excuses to launch atrocities against those who are different. But that is how certain individuals and groups operate. Excuses for violence diminish the human potential for true greatness, such as we witness in hands that reach out to help others in need. Imagine the outcome for the child Herodias after she had delivered the head of John the Baptist to her mother. From that moment her life would be changed for ever, diminished no doubt by the mother's vengeful intent to misuse the beauty of the child's dance.

While the western Christian church languishes about, unwilling to move forward or embrace the real change necessary for growth and survival into the future, people who need Christ suffer, and other forces grow strong in the belief that violence will prevail. All who take up the excuse for violence become for ever changed, like Herodias carrying the heavy platter laden with a bloody head to her mother.

The children of violent parents are like Herodias. They are tools used to validate their parents' excuses for violence. What became of Herodias? Did she ever dance again? What became of everyone present that gruesome day in the court of Herod after the mother ordered her child to do violence, allowed her potentially beautiful dance to become a travesty of betrayal and hate – all because of the challenge to live in a godly way, as John the Baptist had presented.

There's a wonderful hymn, which I'm sure you've sung many times in church – The Lord of the dance. It picks up the joy and ecstasy of David's dance before the ark of God, his free, uninhibited dance which would have so shocked and outraged, or even inspired to jealousy, many of the people. The hymn also picks up on Herodias' dance, when betrayal and darkness descended over Jesus.

Whether we dance for joy or dance to procure our intents, even when the dance is in our heads and not our feet, the Lord sees. The excuses we use to do the wrong thing are not hidden from God, as the mother Herodias sought to hide her ill intent.

Nothing is hidden. No wonder David danced almost naked. He knew he could hide nothing before his Lord. May we allow ourselves to dance like a child, uninhibited, souls exposed in naked delight before our God. May no ill intent destroy the beauty of our soul dance. May we rejoice in the Lord always.