

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ACTIVE FAITH AND LONGING

14th April 2013

2 Samuel 6: 12-23

Luke 7:36-50

James 2:14-26

Over the next few weeks we are going to look at some incidents in the life of King David: not David the shepherd-boy, on the run from Saul, but David after he had become king of God's people. David is a great person to read about and learn from, because he always seems so open: his good points and his faith and his flaws and failings are right there for us all to see and to learn from. This morning we are beginning the story not long after he has become King, when one of his first acts is to bring back to Jerusalem the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred symbol of the relationship between God and his people, which Saul had taken in desperation to bring help in the wars with the Philistines – much like a lucky charm. Now David was bringing it back to where it should be and to become play its part in worship as a reminder of God's presence. And he is happy, so he dances.

When people talk of having an active faith, they may mean many things, but it's not often that they mean that their faith is tied up with their exercise programme. David, however, danced out his faith before God, and it was a fairly vigorous performance! Sacred dance isn't something which we have gone in for much in this church - or in most church of Scotlands. I have seen it in other places however. When I was a student in seminary in Chicago some of my friends used to joke that there were just two moves used in sacred dance: the upward sweep of the arms; and the downward sweep with bent head. That was a vast exaggeration, and some sacred dance can be both beautiful and moving.

There are two reasons for performing a spiritual dance, which can be quite independent of each other or can both be going on at the same time. One is a performance for others to lead them into worship. The other is simply using our bodies to express to God something of what is in our hearts: whether of joy or of sorrow. This latter was what David was doing on the day that the Ark of the Covenant finally came home to Israel. He wasn't thinking about his moves, wasn't trying to teach or help others through his dance. He was only thinking about trying to tell God what he was feeling. He danced because he was happy, more than happy, ecstatically delighted. He knew what he was celebrating - the return of God's presence to the country: this was something worth celebrating. He knew why he was dancing and for whom - others were around but that wasn't the point. He wasn't performing for them.

Michal despised him. Michal was David's wife, but she couldn't find it in her to share her husband's joy, or even to sympathise with it. She despised him. People like Michal are why it can be difficult to simply rejoice in God's goodness and God's presence: we cannot easily forget that there are others who are watching, and watching with a critical eye.

In the incident we read about in Luke's Gospel we see something similar. The woman - tradition has identified her with Mary Magdalene, but Luke doesn't say so - comes and stood behind Jesus at his feet. This tells us that Simon was entertaining Roman-style, where the guests would recline on couches, so the feet were elevated, off the floor. She stands there weeping, and bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and wipes them with her unbound hair (shocking that, to have unbound hair in public. That alone would have indicated to the others that she wasn't a woman of what they would call high morals). Then she opens her alabaster jar of ointment and begins to use it on Jesus' feet.

Simon didn't know where to look. Such an intimate gesture, and in public. He can only assume that Jesus is too innocent to know how this looked to others. This was the outsider despising innocence and simple delight. We see a lot of this sneering attitude to the church today. Our message is a simple one: that God is present with us in the person of Jesus and by his Spirit. This woman was moved to tears and self-forgetful offering by the presence of Jesus. David danced for joy when he realised the presence of God. God is present with us too, in the person of Jesus and by his Spirit. This is why we rejoice in Easter, not just for one day but on and on.

St. Paul said that people find the message of the cross to be a stumbling block - because the cross shows God triumphing through weakness, not strength. But the resurrection is also a stumbling block, because people simply do not know what to do with it. Either you believe it - and the evidence is good - or you do not. If you do, then you will have to take on board everything else that Jesus said and did, and take him seriously. To believe in the resurrection means that you will have to live a life of worship and service. This is not rocket science, but it is something which people want to either mock or make out to be far more complicated than it is. Why? Because real faith means that your life will change, and the comfortable don't want that.

The woman's gift made Simon uncomfortable, but Jesus knew how to accept it. Goodness knows what the woman had in her heart when she came, but whatever it was, knowing that she might be misunderstood did not prevent her. Knowing that she was already despised did not hold her back. And Jesus shows her what it is she has done: she has shown him respect, shown the depth of her longing and devotion, and so she has shown that her heart is pure, whatever her actions might be at times. But Simon and perhaps his other guests were made uncomfortable by this unconventional display of devotion. She was allowing her real self, her real feeling to show. Not good form!

Michal was comfortable. She was the daughter of a King who had become the wife of a King. She knew more about what was due her position - and her husband's position - than most. She thought that she knew more than David did. But she forgot that David was King under God, and his first devotion and joy and delight was not to his position - or hers - but to God. Sometimes his devotion to God would lead him to act in a way that an observer might think beneath him. But David was God's humble servant, and so the idea of anything done for God being beneath him would never have entered his head. His faith was a real active part of his life and dictated how he acted.

There was an advertising campaign on London busses about five years ago, run by the humanist society. The posters read "There probably isn't a God." Objections were made and a counter-campaign had posters reading "There definitely is a God." Most people it seems agree wholeheartedly with neither, but would say "there probably is a God." Most people in this country,

when asked say that they believe in the existence of God, or a Supreme Being, or what Alcoholics Anonymous calls "A Higher Power." They say that they believe, but they think no further about it. James is complaining about that sort of attitude. "You say that you believe God is one - you do well" and you can hear the sarcasm there. "Even the demons believe - and shudder."

His point is that this sort of casual intellectual assent is not faith. People use the word God, or Higher Power or Supreme Being and don't think about what these words imply. Supreme - that's pretty potent, you know. Higher - that makes you lower. The titles we give God carry an implication about how we see ourselves, and what we are going to do about it. The demons shudder - knowing that God exists in his supreme power, and that they are opposed to him. If we are not actively seeking to serve, to worship, to obey him, if we are not longing to come closer to him, then we should shudder too.

If we believe in God as an abstract idea, that is not faith in any way that the New Testament defines it. It is not faith in the saving work of Christ nor is it faith that has changed how we live.

In the New Testament epistles there are two ways of referring to faith. St. Paul is inclined to refer to faith as shorthand for the faithfulness of Jesus, that to which we cling which saves us from the consequences of our sinful lives. James means something not far removed from that, but a little different. James refers to faith as the things that we believe about God and Jesus, which will be shown in how we live our lives. The two ideas are not poles apart, since St. Paul has a lot to say about how a Christian should live, and he is clear that we should live that way as a consequence of our faith - as a consequence of what Jesus has done which saves us. James talks of saving faith as faith which has made a difference to our lives, faith which shows.

David let it show. He did it in the way he tried to live by God's commands, by how he learned to show mercy, by the way he encouraged Israel to worship God alone. He also let it show when he danced before the Lord, with all his might, all his heart, putting his whole self into that moment of joyful worship. The woman wept, letting her sorrow show her repentance and her actions show that it was something about Jesus which had led her to realise her need. Neither of them cared that there were others watching, who might misunderstand. Their longing for God was too great. When I read these stories I wonder if we have made our church too tidy. We are good at words, formal or informal, but one of the sincerest forms of prayer is simple longing, wordless longing for God, longing which will lead us to seek to live in God's ways, but may also at times drive us to express ourselves in ways that don't fit with what is expected - in joy or in sorrow.

David knew that the Lord, for whom he danced, would not despise him; Jesus knew how to accept the woman's longing and make it a blessing to her. I could ask nothing better for anyone than that you have a heart that longs after God. If you do, your faith will show itself - if sometimes in unconventional ways.