

# Confessions from the Dance Floor

Jonathan Green, Methodist Central Hall, 10.08.2008

Before I launch into this evening's address I need to begin with a warning for those listening to the recording. **Be warned, this evening's talk will involve dancing from the minister. So if you experience pauses or heavy breathing at any point during the talk, it is probably because the speaker is engaged in a spectacular feat of dance. Probably spinning on his back...**

## **Life, life and more life**

This evening I want us to think about life, life and more life. For those of us who locate ourselves in the story of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; life, life and more life, is what we believe is at the end of **this life**.

So, tonight I want us to think about our life in God and I want us to think about dancing...

## **Memories of dancing...**

Now, I don't know about you but I've had some disasters on the dance floor. My worst nightmare was having to dance in front of others because I had this belief that I simply could not dance. I was ashamed of the awkwardness of my moves. I remember school disco's with horror. Did I really wear that stuff and did I really try to impersonate MC Hammer?

I remember falling in love with a dancer once. Being captivated with all the things she could do with her body. I too wanted to be able to twirl and bend and wave flags. But I didn't want to make a fool of myself. **I was scared of dancing. I was scared of moving.**

And yet... I **was** a secret dancer. I would dream of spinning on my head to the cheers of crowds. Doing back flips and dancing in formation in a crowd like Michael Jackson did... yes in my imagination I was the king of the dance floor!

But it is my recent memories of dancing that have had the biggest impact on me. Last year a lady called Claire turned up at The Sanctuary and as we got talking I found out that she is a professional dancer. Claire was about to join Springs Dance Company which is a professional Christian Dance Company... One day, Claire invited me to a dance performance at 'The Place', which is a contemporary dance venue near Kings Cross station and I was astonished by what I experienced. Part of the evening performance included audience participation... it was kind of like avant-gard dance... my worst nightmare... but instead, I chose to go with it mostly because I trusted Claire and so, led by Claire and a group of trained dancers I grew in confidence and participated in the performance, along with Rev Martin Turner, Biddy, Maxine and James we left our seats and took part in the performance. Maybe I could dance after all!

Every time I saw Claire from then on I felt like I wanted to dance! Movement would literally be drawn out of me. I would do a few moves and she would always encourage me... I'm sure The Sanctuary guys and girls thought I was crazy though... anyway with my history of self doubt and my growing love of dance I got thinking about doing something different and a little bit daring.

Our Thursday evening meetings have really developed over the years and we now hold an occasional meeting called Space which explores alternative worship where pretty much anything goes and so I thought it would be interesting to invite the Springs Dance Company along to lead us in dance and do a workshop! The evening was called 'movement' and to my surprise people turned up! So we cleared the chairs out and instead of a band and a talk we danced together. The whole community dancing together. It was amazing!!! It was liberating!!! It was daring... It was worship! It was... beautiful.

## God is the King of the Dance Floor!

This evening I want to talk about things that are more often than not spoken about in abstract terms. However, I want to try and help us to get our hearts and minds around them. So let's jump in, or perhaps it's more appropriate to say little miss DJ, hit the music.

Our conversation, the language we use, our verbal expression of God, what I call God Talk, what others call theology is done best when it is trinitarian in nature. That is to say when it is about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that speaking within this framework keeps our conversation coherent, focused and personal.

Eugene Peterson, who penned *The Message*, a translation of scripture says that 'early on, the Christian community realized that everything about us -- our worshiping and learning, conversing and listening, teaching and preaching, obeying and deciding, working and playing, eating and sleeping -- takes place in the "country" of the Trinity, that is, in the presence and among the operations of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.' **He goes on to say**, 'If God's presence and work are not understood to define who we are and what we are doing, then nothing we come up with will be understood and lived properly. (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places*, 6)

In other words, all that we are about, all that we do and say makes sense in relation to God who is diverse and yet unified. Three and yet one. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You know, so often the concept of the Trinity is explained in the abstract: water, steam and ice... or in words and actions that are impersonal and that we struggle to connect with: creator, redeemer, sustainer... and my worry is that because **it is difficult to get our heads around and because it is often approached in an abstract way that** we may actually struggle to connect with life, life and more life.

God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not an abstract concept... Father, Son and Holy Spirit are personal, and that truth comes to us with such force in the Scriptures that it's like a thunderclap or a bolt of lightning... it just cannot be ignored.

God is supposed to be accessible to men, women, and children and we are called to **really enter into this communal life of love**. A life where we experience, up close and personal, love and forgiveness, hope and desire. You know, we discover in a very real way that we do not know God by defining him but by being loved by him and loving in return.

You know, I worry so much about the church sometimes when all I ever see is people talking about the reality but never actually experiencing that reality, and us pastors are the worst... we give our lives (wrongly I think sometimes) to try and help people to live the full lives that we describe and we forget to lead by example.

Too often we speak about life in its fullest expression in abstract terms and forget that we need to experience it. So this evening, I want us to take a deep breath and talk about something that will hopefully lead us to change as we think about our lives caught up in the life of God.

### **And a dance...**

So how do we start to get our heads and hearts around this divine community? Through a picture of course, a metaphor... God is like... or more accurately, through a movement....

I want us to think about 'perichoresis'. Perichoresis is the Greek word for dance. And it is the term that was used by our Greek theologian ancestors as a metaphor to refer to the Trinity.

Imagine a folk dance, a round dance, with three partners in each set. The music starts up and the partners holding hands begin moving in a circle. On signal from the caller, they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out, swinging first one and then another. The tempo increases, the partners move more swiftly with

and between and among one another, swinging and twirling, embracing and releasing, holding on and letting go. But there is no confusion, every movement is cleanly coordinated in precise rhythms as each person maintains his or her own identity. To the onlooker, the movements are so swift it is impossible at times to distinguish one person from another; the steps are so intricate that it is difficult to anticipate the actual configurations as they appear: Peichoresis literally means around dance. To dance around! (peri=around; choresis = dance). (Peterson, Christ Plays, 44)

And the dancers in question are practiced and skilled dancers! They have been doing this for a very long time.

This kind of dance is a beautiful, profound, mysterious and I would also say, without wanting to contradict the fact that I just said mysterious, an accurate description of the God whom we worship here today.

The essence of Trinity, the centre piece of Christian theology, widely considered to be the most subtle and complex and many would say unfathomable of all doctrines, is captured here in a picture that anyone can observe in a barn dance or an Irish Ceilidh.

And if you can get your head and heart around this beautiful metaphor, if you can imagine the eternal dance then I would suggest that you are one step closer to experiencing life, life and more life. You see, for those of us who are 'In Christ' we are caught up in this dance too. We are caught up in the divine life...

The Trinity is the broad horizon against which we understand and practice the Christian life, largely and comprehensively... this is the abundant life Jesus promises... **now!**

You see, we know God only by engaging with God... we know God by accepting an invitation to dance. You know if I ask someone to dance, they can decline. I should not coercive nor cajole. If you grab someone it is called assault. That is bad. So God invites and waits...

If we are going to know God we have to participate in the relationship that is God. And when we do we discover ourselves as unique participants — each of us created one of a kind — caught up in the life of God. The Christian life is not preprogrammed; it is a release into freedom.

Isn't that stunning... Perhaps we should pause for just a second, if only to catch our breath!

**Read John 17: 20-26...**

## **Hearing the music of the kingdom**

I have read here and there that some theologians tell us that God not only spoke creation into existence but it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that God sang creation into being.

### **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit- the wind- the breath of God hovered over the surface of the water.

And God said: Let there be light, and there was light.

The first chapter of Genesis tells us that God kept speaking, and creation kept happening until finally God saw all that he had made and it was very, very good.

Even though we are very familiar with that passage it is a bit strange that God could say something into nothing and the result would be tangible creation. It's the miracle of creation!

Scientists have recently discovered a new vibration in the universe. Superstring Theory is literally the symphony of everything. So how do you get everything from vibrating strings?

According to superstring theory, the fundamental forces and various particles found in nature are nothing more than different modes of vibrating strings.

Gravity, for example, is caused by the lowest vibratory mode of a circular string. Higher frequencies and different interactions of superstrings create different forms of matter and energy. The universe is matter and energy...

We are matter and energy!

Scientist George Bates tells us: The universe - being composed of an enormous number of these vibrating strings is akin to a cosmic symphony and this cosmic symphony plays throughout the universe.

Jonathan Edwards, the revivalist preacher declared two centuries ago: God hums the tune of the universe!

There may be something to this singing creation into being.

It is also another really helpful metaphor to help us understand our life in God.

**You see, I think that evangelism, sharing our faith in the world at large is like a dance and like every dance you need music!**

For too long, evangelism has been taught to be like a sales pitch, where if we can just dress our shop right, if we can just set the mood correctly, if we can engineer the environment or just get the conversation around to **this thing** then we can make a sale. The person can give their life to Jesus and they can go to heaven when they die and the more sales we generate the more profitable or successful we will be. You can imagine how when the church tried to adjust to a changing world driven by markets and with everyone being branded consumers, that the church just became another market place.

Or evangelism became seen as conquest, as warfare, as ultimatum as threat, as proof, as argument, as entertainment, as show, as monologue, as something you have to do... again, unhelpful in today's world...

And again, I think that the metaphor of dancing and music can help us here too.

It seems to me that pretty much every culture has its own dance. Dance, like song and rhythm is a universal gift... you can go to the deepest part of the jungle... and the members of the tribe mark out their boundaries with songs or they dance to tell their stories... its amazing stuff!

Perhaps this music has been playing throughout all time, it is in everything and it is in us, it just needs drawing out from us. The story of God and human kind is the developing story of God helping humanity to hear the universal song... perhaps we could say that Jesus shows us how to live according to the music. Jesus shows us the dance moves. The actions of the kingdom. Jesus shows us how to live in God's way... and the first dance partners are invited, Peter, James, John... Judas... and they were pretty slow learners... they stepped on a lot of toes, and Peter is usually putting his feet in the wrong place, usually his mouth... and then Jesus tells them that he needs to go so that he may send his Holy Spirit... and the Spirit comes at Pentecost and so the disciples get caught up in this divine dance... and remember Jesus' charge that they are to teach everyone they meet about this life... teach them everything I taught you he says at the end of Matthew's Gospel... in other words, teach them the moves of the Kingdom of God. Teach them to hear the music of the Kingdom... and help them to dance to the music.

And so we invite others to dance...

Perhaps its best to describe disciple making then as a conversation, as friendship, as influence, as invitation, as companionship, as challenge, as opportunity, as conversation, as dance, as something you get to do... I think that's a far more healthy approach and much more in keeping with the spirit of Jesus command.

### **Jess' party**

I went to an amazing party recently and there was a live band playing... ironically, having just had a workshop with springs I felt somewhat more confident on the dance floor...

And so, armed with my lightening moves I moved during the first song to the dance floor! For the first time in my life I was literally the first one on the dance floor, not because I was any good. But because the music was great and I wanted the whole place to feel liberated to dance, so nervously I went up there feeling very exposed and just started to dance. I was energizing the dance floor baby . And you know what, others seeing my feeble attempts began to join me. They probably felt sorry for me! They gathered around me, to try and hide me from the other party goers.

Now, you don't need to be good at dancing to get the party started, you often just need to get out of your seat and engage with the music. Helping other to follow... Hoping others will follow.

Likewise, we are called to hear the music of God's kingdom, go to the dance floor, which for us is the whole world and begin to live and move and have our being...

As we do so we start to invite others to dance with us too.

You know when you are on the dance floor and you don't have much confidence what happens? You see someone doing something cool and start copying it. Like the deck of cards... we start with simple moves. We invite others to take little steps.

## **God likes us more than we think!**

It was CS Lewis who said that **joy** is the serious business of heaven! In the midst of the pain and struggle of this life with tragedy in so many lives, the Christian life hopes for the kingdom in its fullest measure when one day every tear will be wiped away. This kingdom of God is marked by joy, it is full of music and movement.

And you know, there is one more incredible thought I want us to briefly think about. God does not only dance in partnership, not only do we too get caught up in that life when we are in Christ, not only is our job to help others to dance and get caught up in God's life but... we also need to understand something else... and that is...

**God likes us more than we think!**

In the book of Zephaniah, the prophet utters these amazing words... **Read... 3.17**

God delights over us with singing... and this is how one version literally puts it...

He twirls over you as in a dance...

I really believe with all of my heart that God dances for joy over us...

You know, I think that God is especially fond of us... God is especially fond of his children.

I also think that when God dances over us he doesn't just gently twirl around... I was reminded by a friend yesterday that when it speaks of God's action here in Zephaniah the sentiment is that God twirls like a whirlwind... its energetic, its passionate, its wild. I love you!!! I think you are amazing! You bring me so much joy!

God loves us so deeply and he loves the world so deeply that he sent his one and only son, Jesus, to teach us to hear the eternal song and learn to dance to the music. To be free because we are caught up in the very life of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the dancing God. And our call is to dance in such a beautiful and compelling way that the whole of creation gets caught up in the joy and beauty of it all!

I think that the metaphor of dance can unlock our hearts and mind to see life in new ways and as we let the truth of this verse change us may we actually get out of our chairs and dance. In other words, to experience, to truly hold onto and know life, life and even more life.

What hope, what joy, what beauty, what truth. So for our sake and for the sake of the world, let us respond to God's invitation to dance and let's put all our energy into it! In the power of his Spirit and to the glory of his name.

**Amen.**