

Proper 16, Year B, Second Service
Rod Prince

Exodus 4: 27 – 5: 1
Hebrews 13: 17-21

I hope that you have all managed to grab a break over what one might hesitate to call the "Summer period". Caroline and I, together with the boys, enjoyed a great week away in Brittany with some friends from Wirksworth. Whilst we were there we went to a Breton festival of traditional dancing. As you can imagine it was a great hit with the boys; with Oliver declaring that it was the third worst day in his life! But then, that's what parents are for!

At the event there was a large open stage, above which was arranged a local band. The music started and for a long time no one ventured onto the stage. Then slowly, in groups of two or three, people came up and joined hands until there were perhaps as many as two hundred, all with hands linked and moving slowly around in a long snake following a set pattern of steps. It was wonderful to see a community building before one's eyes, everyone part of a unified whole, everyone welcomed. The dancing continued and the whole group, as one, changed their tempo and dance steps to the new music.

Among the dancers were some men and women dressed in Breton traditional costume. They were more knowledgeable in the steps and intricacies of the various dances. Although initially dispersed throughout the group they slowly began to come together, first in the long line of dancers and then gradually they formed up in a separate group making their own circle in a distinct part of the stage. The music died away and the two groups dispersed. I sat there, an outsider looking in and saw so much of human nature in a short time.

In today's two readings we hear about community, about leadership and about how, through the examples of our lives and our Christian life as a community, we can communicate the vision that God has for all people. I could say that these two readings teach us about dancing together by dancing with God.

In the first reading from the Book of Exodus we learn of Moses meeting with Aaron at the start of their negotiations with Pharaoh to secure the release for the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt. Earlier in the book of Exodus we read of God calling Moses from the burning bush. He calls Moses to lead his chosen people in the dance. Moses has fled from Egypt to the land of Midian after killing an Egyptian. He tries every possible means to escape the task of leadership given to him. If I go to the Israelites they won't believe you sent me. I don't even know your name? I am who I am is the reply. Yes, but, what if they don't believe me what do I do? I will give you two signs to show them, says the Lord. What if that doesn't work. Then I will give you another sign you can show them which will convince them. Hmmm....., Ah yes. Look God I am not eloquent, not much of a dancer in fact, two left feet, bit of a wallflower, a bit slow, not your natural leader in fact. I will teach you to dance says God. So what is the problem? Please Lord send someone else? Finally God says You are the one, Aaron can help but to paraphrase the Almighty – put on your top hat, tie up your white tie, brush up your tails because you are going to lead the dancing. To those of you of a reluctant nature, be warned, God, it seems, like the programme makers of "Come dancing" enjoys a challenge!

The second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews is taken from the end of the letter. In common with many sermons it is the part where you try to sum up everything you have told your captivated congregation already, just in case their attention may have slipped ever so slightly. Bishop Alistair has written an excellent commentary on the letter to the Hebrews. He has neatly summarised the content in the title "Growing the Kingdom, The Letter to the Hebrews as a resource for Mission". The letter to the Hebrews is just that; a manual for growing the Kingdom of God on earth. It contains everything you need to grow a Christian community which should strive to reflect the kingdom you yearn to join, the kingdom of Heaven.

When God called the Jews to be the chosen people he called them to be a people who would draw the other nations of the world into the dance with God. They were to be his dance leaders, who by their way of life and standards of conduct would attract the notice of the people of the ancient world. Alas, they fell into the all too human trap of thinking they were special and therefore superior, set apart from others. They came to believe that they were born to dance alone to a dance made especially for them. Nor did they welcome the many messengers of God, the prophets, when they told them they were failing to dance properly let alone to lead the rest world in the dance.

Today Christians face the same temptation. The belief that one is "saved" is prone to the same risks as believing that one is "Chosen". Both need to be handled with the utmost caution, reverence and humility. Failure to do so can lead to some very bad attitudes. When we start believing that we call the tune we stop listening to the music and fall out of step.

The world is a rough place and it is all too easy to hide from it by leaving the community of dancers to form our own cosy little troupe just as those dancers in Breton traditional dress did; just as the Jewish people did; just as many churches today do.

Jesus didn't think like that. He weaved his way through all the dancers; the Jews, the Gentiles, the good, the bad, the rich, the poor, the old and the diseased. He danced with and for everyone. That is what we as Christians are called to do; to dance with and for everyone. We are not called to dance alone or believe that the dance was made for us alone.

There is a wonderful hymn by Sydney Carter which I sure many of you know and sing called "I danced in the Morning". It is a song about Jesus, the Lord of the Dance. Here are the last lines "I am the life that'll never never die; I'll live in you if you'll live in me - I am the Lord of the Dance said He. Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the lord of the Dance said he, and I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the Dance said he".

Whether you are a leader like Moses, reluctant or not, or someone who takes their cue from those who call out the steps, each of us needs to remember that all are called to the dance. The fact that we know some of the steps should not engender any feeling of exclusivity but rather encourage us to share the delight of the dance with everyone we meet.

There is only one Lord of the Dance, Jesus Christ. He has paid for all to be able to join the dance with His life.

May the Lord of the Dance lead you and guide your footsteps.