

## *The Divine Dance*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Christmas Eve — 24 December 2022

Reverend Martin Johnson

Every now and again we hold a straw poll to test the waters and see what the congregation's best loved hymns are. All the usual ones put in an appearance and often among them is 'Lord of the Dance.' It is a very versatile hymn with a great tune and can be sung at any time of the year: *I danced in the morning when the world was begun and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun and I came down from heaven and danced on the earth at Bethlehem I had my birth*, is the first verse. I did think about singing it this evening, but there are too many Christmas favourites.

As each Christmas rolls around, we tend to look back and remember the tumultuous events—what a year that was; 2022 is much the same. Great events, change, upheaval, endings and beginnings. This year has marked the end of the Elizabethan age and the inevitable retrospection that has brought. It is said, and perhaps I am confusing 'The Crown' with reality, but it is said when asked once if she had any regrets about her reign the Queen simply said 'Aberfan', referring to the disaster in the Welsh mining village in 1966 which resulted in the deaths of 116 children and 28 adults. Initially, the Queen sent the Duke of Edinburgh, not wanting to get in the way; eight days later she herself went to Aberfan to mourn alongside the villagers.

We are very quick to wonder and doubt the presence of God when events threaten to overwhelm us. We are told that the world's tragedies are indeed the rock on which atheism is built. But God's response to such thinking would, I am sure, also be one word: 'Christmas.' Those who question God's presence seem to have something in common, they hold to a view of God that is completely upended by Christmas.

There is absolutely no way that we can reconcile the idea of God 'almighty' or 'all powerful' with the newborn child of Bethlehem. And not just any newborn but a child born in an animal shelter, a child whose birth would trigger a murderous edict from the puppet king of an occupying regime, a child whose parents were outside the prescripts of the Mosaic law on marriage; a couple who had been forced to leave home to register with the authorities; a child who would become a refugee. It is quite extraordinary that this child survived: this is Emmanuel, God with us.

If we hold to this view of God, then we will find God's presence in many, many places in our world and in our own lives. When are we tempted to say 'I cannot hold to faith in God who is all knowing and yet seemingly allows the wars and disasters that mar our world', God says, 'I'm a helpless baby before your eyes'. When we are tempted to say 'I cannot hold to faith in God who allows the innocent to suffer and discrimination and prejudice to thrive', God says, 'I'm a tiny infant, just as vulnerable to rejection and hatred as you'.

Unfortunately, try as we might, all too often many still tend to think of faith as being something akin to belief in Santa or the Tooth Fairy. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, poor old Santa has become part of the problem. Rather than being celebrated as the philanthropic Bishop, St Nicholas of Myra, Santa Claus has morphed into a God-like figure who is coming to see if you've been naughty or nice and is doling out largesse accordingly. This of course is a parody of the God of our tradition.

Our giving and receiving of gifts is in some way a sign of *our* preparedness to be vulnerable. It is a small sign of the offering of ourselves; it has a sacramental quality. Our gifts are not

rewards, but offerings; ‘I hope you like this’ . . . and in receiving we are grateful for whatever we have been given . . . and it may be something we had never thought we might need or want! In giving and receiving there is vulnerability, and this is a key to understanding this great festival. God does not give us *something*—he is no divine Santa—he gives of himself and in doing so demonstrates to us a life vulnerable ‘for others.’ He sets the model for our own lives. God does want to get in the way; God simply comes among us and is one of us in every respect.

If we are able to hold on to this faith, it will have an impact on everything, but particularly our relationships with those who share our lives, and those paths cross ours. Just as Christ in the wonderful words of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,’ so do we. We embrace vulnerability.

But in case your mind is taken immediately to the grime of struggle and poverty, to the running of soup kitchens, or the care of refugees, important as these things are, there is so much more. Our Western view of God, inherited largely from St Augustine, shows the hierarchy of the Godhead, the Father at the top of the triangle, with the Son and the Spirit taking the other angles (with apologies to St Augustine for a rather over-simplistic overview of his Trinitarian doctrine). The Eastern Christian tradition comes to our aid, however, with the idea of *perichoresis*. This is the divine dance of the Trinity; at its heart is joy, and Christmas is the time to join in with that divine dance—with apologies to any Methodists or Puritans in our midst!

I am not speaking about ‘shaking your booty down to the ground’, but the glorious grace and intimacy of the waltz, or the sensual tango! This is much more than just learning the steps. This is about what has been coined ‘inter-corporeality’, a fusing of minds and bodies. The partners, said the great philosopher Martin Buber, ‘don’t look at each other, they look into each other.’ Dance partners at one, in their joy and vulnerability.

This is what Christmas faith is all about, God comes among us and invites us into that divine dance, with its joy and vulnerability. God takes the lead, looks into the human condition, and invites us to do the same—but in a new way, through *his* eyes. Jean Baptiste Molière, the French playwright whose 400th birthday was celebrated this year, once said: ‘Humanity is nothing without dance.’ A truer word never spoken.

A very joyous Christmas to you all. May 2023 see us all join in with the great dance which is Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.