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Pentecost 6B 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19, Psalm 24, Ephesians 1:1-14, Mark 6:14-29

Put God first, second and third.

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

One of the things I do during the week, as some of you know, is to do the communion service at Kankinya nursing home. For the last few weeks the residents who I see there have been avidly following the World Cup. I myself have not watched one game, one news report about it, but my dear old friends have kept me well informed. (And just to let you know, they are convinced we were robbed!) Anyway one of the things they told me about was the celebration in Italy afterwards. There was an escort into town accompanied by an honour guard of 10,000 beeping scooters. The team was then transferred to two open-top buses and taken off to the Circus Maximus where 1,000,000+ fans were packed. Spectators and others stripped-to-the-waist to impersonate Freddie Mercury singing *We Are the Champions*. The party to end all parties went on with singing and dancing all night.

In today's readings there is a lot of dancing and celebrating going on. Firstly we have King David and a mob of others dancing and jumping, going absolutely ape, worshipping God. They are carrying the Ark of the Covenant on a cart from Baale-judah to Jerusalem. And while they are doing it they are dancing and singing and playing music on a whole lot of instruments. We hear later that his wife Micah sees him dancing and she "despised him in her heart". She obviously didn't think much of his dancing.

And then in the Gospel we hear about the dance of Herodias, the daughter of Herod Antipas. When Herod is celebrating his birthday she comes in and dances for his guests. It must have been some dance because Herod promises to give her anything she asks for. We know the outcome of that – John the Baptist is executed and his head on a plate is presented to first the girl and then her mother.

There are many examples of dancing and celebrating in the bible, many reasons and many outcomes. In the book of Exodus after the red sea has been parted, the Israelites are safe on the other side and the Egyptian army is drowned, Miriam, Aarons sister and all the women dance and sing with tambourines. Miriam sings out 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea'

And then there is the story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai and finding all the people dancing around a golden statue of a calf. In anger and dismay he throws the tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them onto the ground, breaking them.

Dancing and celebrating then seem to not be a problem in and of themselves. All our gifts and talents are neutral gifts and abilities. It to what use we put them that is the issue. Or another way to put it is that power of any type in and of itself is not a problem; it is the intent with which it is used, the end to which it is directed that seems to be the difficulty.

A question I believe we must ask ourselves is - to what end are we using our gifts and talents? To what end are we using the power we have accumulated? How do we identify the beat to which we dance or march? Or as one person put it, how do we break free from the persistent pounding of the drumbeat of death to follow the Lord of Life?

Many of you would have heard of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th century Spaniard who founded the Jesuits and who wrote the classic book: *“The Spiritual Exercises”*. The exercises are one of the devotional and meditative tools I have used over the years. At the beginning of the book Ignatius makes this statement that forms the basis of the whole book. He writes, (and you will have to excuse the male pronouns etc)

Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God, our lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honour to dishonour, a long life to a short life...our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.

Ignatius echoes what the Hebrew Patriarchs and matriarchs, the prophets and Jesus himself proclaimed – put God first, second and third. What else is that statement about we repeat each Sunday – *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength?*

If we do that, if we make God our priority, then our gifts and talents will be used in the best possible way. To do it of course takes effort, time, a high degree of self-honesty and a willingness to travel to the shadows and depths of our intent and motivation. It will take courage and self-sacrifice. Yet if we take the journey then we have a much better chance of loving others as God loves them, of forgiving those who wrong us, of taking

care of the earth and all that is in it and even of taking care of ourselves.

Now this of course begs the question – what is it that God is asking of us? We all know about terrorists who cause death and destruction because they believe it is the will of God. Or of Presidents and Prime Ministers who commit a nation to invasion and war because they believe they have somehow been divinely ordered to do so. Or of people that believe hitting children is sanctioned by scripture. Or of people that believe racism, slavery or homophobia somehow finds its justification in an appeal to the almighty.

The idea of God has been put to as many twisted uses as the human mind can conceive. Maybe as the atheists tell us the whole idea of God is the problem. It is fatally flawed and the sooner we jettison it the better off the whole earth will be. However we have tried the humanist agenda, we have tried the God free communist state and we did not seem any better off. In fact I would suggest we were much worse off.

Someone said (and I wish I could remember who it was) – If people don't believe in something, they will believe anything. Our problem is not God. Our problem is in ourselves.

Herod is a man with a lot of power but in the end it is his fear that lets him down.

Mark records that Herod understood that John the Baptist was a righteous and holy man and sought to protect him. Yet Herod went through with the execution even in spite of his great remorse. He did so in order to preserve his honour and authority, his status and power.

And King David as we know may have been dancing and singing, praising God and jumping for joy in today's reading but we know that soon his lust for Bathsheba, his murder of her husband and the consequences of that turned his dancing into a wellspring of grief and sorrow. David did not keep God first, second and third even if he started out that way.

What we need which David began with and lost, Herod never had and Jesus had in spades was reckless and complete abandon to God in every minute of every day, God as the centre, ground and compass of our being, God as our 1st, 2nd and 3rd priority. Only then will our talents, gifts and power be used to “praise, reverence and serve God” and not the dictates of our own shadow.

May our voices praise God, may our hearts reverence him and may our hands serve him through our service to others and the whole creation. May God meet us in our communion together and may our prayer of remembrance and thanksgiving glorify his name.

Amen