

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
8th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B - 2 Samuel 6
July 14, 2024

With my body I Thee worship

Our Scripture readings today draw us into worship. They ask us to consider what worship is, who it is that we worship, and how we go about worshipping. I would especially like for you to consider these things from the perspective of Anglicanism. As Episcopalians, we are in Communion with the Church of England historically and in our polity today. One of the main ways that this is evident is through our liturgical life together. By liturgy, I mean our work of Common Prayer and our Sacramentality. I'm willing to bet – whether you are aware of it or not – that a big reason you are here today in an Episcopal Church is because this liturgical way of worship has gotten ahold of you. But first we mustn't neglect the Scriptures which led me to consider worship in the first place. Though we may not discuss all of them, each of our Scriptures today are doxological or at least invite us to consider who it is we worship and how we are to do so.

Did you notice in our Old Testament reading and in our Gospel reading this morning that we have the stories of two very different kings? And not just **two kings** – Herod and David – but also we have the description of **two dances** this morning. We might start with the story of Herod's party in our Gospel reading. While David's dance is clearly an act of worship, I would assert that the disturbing dance from Herod's birthday party is also about worship.

Herod is having a party for his officers, courtiers, and the leaders of Galilee in honor of his own birthday when his daughter (named Herodias after her mother who is also named after her husband) comes in and dances before these men and it says, "Oh, how she pleased Herod and his court." If it sounds kind of gross and disturbing, that's because it is. But it gets worse from there because there is also a political dance happening here that allows for familial manipulation to satisfy a personal grudge caused by a prophet's word. And that prophet's head, St. John the Baptist, is served on a platter along with a side of Herod's pride.

Again, our Scriptures have at least two kings and two dances. I've just recalled the first. As to who or what is being worshiped and how: you can answer it your own way but I'd say Herod is being worshiped along with power and pride and youth and vengeance. The worship happens through dance, yes, and lust and a performative promise and an executioner's blade.

The other dance is by another king in our Scriptures. It's David's famous procession with the ark of the covenant, the very throne of God being brought into Jerusalem. The description here is liturgically fantastic: Thirty-thousand people are marching with him, sacrificing an ox and a fattling every six paces, David in his best ephod, leaping and dancing before the Lord with all his might.

It's an incredibly powerful portrayal of what worship is meant to be as David – a man after God's own heart, a warrior King, a central figure in all the Scriptures, and in the world over to this day – is in complete submission, lost in the act, **worshipping God**, not just with his words or even his heart alone but with his body. David danced before the Lord with all his might, it says. He is offering to God his entire self in creative, vulnerable, and complete worship.

Again, two kings and two dances, though we might add in another King if we are to claim Christ as our Lord and we might comprehend a third dance if we, like the passage from Ephesians captures so poetically, realize that God has moved heaven and earth to make us his partners, too. And that is what we are doing in worship. When we gather here to recount God's saving deeds and continued work among us, we are claiming Christ as King and finding ourselves in this liturgical rhythm of prayer, song, and sacrament. Again, I think that the way we do this as Episcopalians is especially sacred, sustaining, and profound.

An Anglican nun of sorts once said this: "The liturgy is of comfort to the disarrayed mind. We need not choose our thoughts, the words are aligned, like a rope for us to cling to."¹ When we have no words due to sorrow or confusion, we find here the words of life, the Scriptures to pray, and ultimately the Word of God, Jesus the Christ, being present to love us back to life again. And when our pride or hypocrisy or fear are screaming loudly inside of us, then we find quiet here in a bit of silence and a familiar refrain. Or when society's tantrums are getting out of control, here we are surrounded by Common Prayer with near strangers and those closer to us than our own kin. We learn not to react in these rituals to everything that flashes in the pan as we regain not only the perspective of Christ but Christ's veryself again and again.

I am often reminded of a uniquely Anglican example, as we reflect on the totality of David's worship (heart, mind, soul, and body). It's the liturgy from Thomas Cranmer's 1549 Book of Common Prayer for matrimony. After the partner is taken as one's wedded husband or wedded wife, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till parted by death, then the man puts a ring on the woman's fourth finger whilst saying – and this reminds me of David dancing before the Lord – "With thys ring I thee wed: Thys golde and silver I thee geve: **with my body I thee worship**: and withal my worldly

¹ Sister Monica Joan, *Call the Midwife*

Goodes I thee endowe.”² It’s the “with my body I thee worship” in the vows of matrimony that captures so beautifully all of our worship, like David dancing before the Lord.

Here we kneel, bow, cross ourselves – worshipping with our bodies. Here we sing and speak songs and prayers to the Almighty, repositioning ourselves as creatures before the Creator. Here we find Sacraments, God at our fingertips, nourishing us with grace we can touch and taste. Surely here we dance before the Lord as we are knit together into the Body of Christ.

I’ll close with these words from Rachel Held Evans. She wrote:

“When I was ready to give up on the Church, it was the sacraments that pulled me back. When my faith had become little more than an abstraction, a set of propositions to be affirmed or denied, the tangible, tactile nature of the sacraments invited me to touch, smell, taste, hear, and see God in the stuff of everyday life again. They got God out of my head and into my hands. They reminded me that Christianity isn’t meant to simply be believed; it’s meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people.”³

It was the Sacraments and our liturgical life that reconnected her to Christ and his Church and taught her how she could dance with the King.

² http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Marriage_1549.htm

³ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*