

Open to the Sacred
Sacred Movement
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent 2008

I have always loved dancing and like to remember that we human beings are not disembodied spirits; we have bodies; we move; we pray to God “in Whom we live and **move** and have our being”. In the 1970s I got involved in probably the first liturgical dance group in this country at All Saints’, Margaret Street, called the Epiphany Dancers. Later I joined the St James’s Liturgical Dancers and lastly a group called Rivers of Life, formed in around 2001, which sadly disbanded when our gifted choreographer moved away from London.

What is the point of liturgical dance? In all these three groups we understood that the Christian faith is based on an embodied God, Jesus Our Lord, upon the Incarnation; we also understood that gesture and movement can sometimes speak louder than words, can convey ideas, beliefs and feelings at a deeper level than words can. When we were planning a new dance we would spend many weeks thinking about the subject, bringing poems, readings from the bible, pieces of music, even pictures, whilst keeping on with our regular class work (we also believed that we had to work on technique and rehearse very seriously). We learned that even the tiniest, simplest movement, done in perfect unison by a few of us, could carry to the back of a church, could become very powerful. But the movements were there not just to present something visually beautiful – the outer had to convey something inward otherwise there was no point to it; it had to convey an inner spiritual meaning.

I remember hearing a story which illustrated for me what it was we were aiming to do through liturgical dance, and what was possible even with people like us who were not necessarily the greatest dancers in the world. The Royal Ballet were on tour in Greece: one evening they were invited to a party and were sitting around chatting when their host, a rather overweight and not very handsome Greek gentleman, said he wanted to dance for them. You can imagine that these highly trained dancers who kept their bodies in sleek and slender trim with their muscles exercised daily, were horrified at the idea, but out of politeness, of course, accepted his proposal. The ballerina who was telling this story (on the radio it must have been) then described how this man began to move and through his dancing expressed something from deep within himself which was profoundly moving. By the end these highly trained, sophisticated ballet dancers were in tears.

Often our liturgical dance group included children in our dances: we would sometimes choreograph for them or they would join us in a simple circle dance. For them, especially, movement could express a message more directly than words. Perhaps at school you sometimes use arm and hand movements to express the words of a song. You can do this too when you pray, and involve dance steps as well. Why not think up movements which you feel express the words of a prayer? They can be very simple. You could then teach these to others, and when you do such movements as a group their expressive power is multiplied tenfold.

Sacred movement is at the very core of our faith: the Church Fathers used the Greek word *perichoresis* (*peri* = around *choresis* = circle) or circle dance to describe the relationship of the three Persons of the Trinity. Sacred movement is an inseparable part of liturgy. The movements of the celebrant, the coordination of deacon, sub-deacon and priest as they line up, turn, genuflect, the movement of the arms, the position of the hands create patterns which are there to help focus the people of God on the story of Salvation, enacted at the altar. The way the servers walk, hold themselves, keep their hands still (or not!) is important: it helps to focus the congregation or, if not done well, can distract, dissipate attention. The purpose of the movement is to help us shift to a deeper, inner level, where we can become aware of Christ's presence in our midst.

Sacred movement is not something which is confined to the sanctuary – it is for everyone, for children just as much as for adults, for the agile and for those whose movement is restricted. It always has a symbolic meaning: when we make the sign of the cross or when the sign of the cross is made over us at the end of the Mass, this carries with it the significance of Christ's death for us, of His protection over us, of His presence in us. When we kneel before the altar, we express our dependence on God, our need for Him, our love. When at the Peace we stretch out our hands to our neighbour we are enacting an essential part of the Gospel – we cannot approach the altar until we are reconciled one with another. When we genuflect towards the altar we are expressing our reverence for God, and when we bow to one another we are expressing our reverence for human beings who are created in God's image. It is good when we enter a church to dip our fingers into the stoup of holy water which often stands near the entrance, and to make the sign of the cross with that water: by this gesture we are acknowledging that we come into God's presence through the waters of

baptism, we remember our baptism which joined us to the Body of Christ.

A movement which is part of all of us at all times is the simple act of breathing. In some Christian traditions breathing has been developed as a way of praying: for example in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, breathing has been combined with the Jesus Prayer – breathing in with the words “Lord Jesus Christ Son of God” and breathing out with the final words “have mercy upon me a sinner”. You can do this even when you are just walking along the road! Under the guidance of a spiritual director, religious and lay people in the Orthodox tradition learn to draw the prayer into the heart, so that as the heart beats so continues the prayer without ceasing. Bowing and making the sign of the cross during prayer, both at home and in church, at very frequent intervals, is also something which has developed in Orthodoxy. Religious will be taught to get down on their knees and bow their heads down to the ground many times during their prayers, as movement is seen as a means of keeping the mind and body alert. For all of us, the position of the back and head in prayer, as taught by St Theresa, is important: we should keep our backs straight with the head held in its natural position to help concentration and alertness.

Paradoxically movement in prayer is there to help us to be still, inwardly still, and “to feed on Him in our hearts”. Fr Paul told me a very moving story the other day. He was visiting a woman in hospital who was paralysed and could only blink, nothing else. In the next-door room lay a man, also paralysed, who had had a car accident because of drink driving; he had killed his wife in the process and other passengers. He was full of anger and resentment, whereas she, Fr Paul said, was one of the most powerful people he had ever met: she irradiated peace, an inner power which transformed those around her. She prayed, and Fr Paul asked her to pray for the paralysed man in the room next to hers. A few weeks after she began praying for him, he died, surrounded by his friends and family. The nurses all remarked on the extraordinary change in him. He was no longer angry and disturbed, and he died in peace. When the man’s relatives thanked Fr Paul for his prayers, he replied that the remarkable change had come about thanks to the prayers of the paralysed woman next-door.

Inner stillness and silence in which we receive insight, sense Christ’s presence, are enlightened by the Light of the World, are the goals of sacred movement. We seek to be, as our second reading tells us, “children of light”, to be “light in the Lord”, to wake up from our sleep

so that “Christ will shine” on us. We are like the man in the Gospel who was born blind: we need Jesus to shine on us and to open our eyes so that we can respond to His question “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” like the man in the Gospel, saying “Lord I believe”. And then we should fall on our knees and worship Him.