

And David and all the House of Israel were making merry before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps tambourines and castanets and cymbals.... and David danced before the Lord with all his might...

- 2 Samuel 6: 5,14

DRAFT

On this Sunday 30 years ago I was ordained deacon by the Bishop of Oxford in the Church of England. It was an extraordinary occasion in many ways. It was practice in the Diocese of Oxford that the diocesan bishops would ordain all the priests at the Christchurch Cathedral in Oxford. The deacons would be ordained by another of his area bishops elsewhere, in one of the larger parish churches. There were 11 or so of us ordained on this occasion. It was an extraordinary occasion also in that I was an ordinand from South Africa in exile in England. I had been offered an alternative oath to make so that I did not have to swear allegiance to the Queen. I declined because I was determined, as I had been throughout my training, that I was not to be different from any other clergyman of the Church of England. But there was another South African being ordained with me on that occasion. Rynhaud de la bat Smit was from Pretoria, studied in Oxford and trained with me at Cuddesdon. The coincidence had the media abuzz!

Of even greater interest was the venue of the ordination. The shopping centre at Central Milton Keynes had been turned into a cathedral for that occasion. Milton Keynes, where I was to serve my title as curate at the Woughton Ecumenical Team Ministry, was a new town. It had the air of modernity, with sweeping streets, one-way streets in straight lines, roundabouts and modern housing. It was a case study in modern and progressive town planning. The shopping mall was another innovation those days. It was an architectural wonder, quite unlike anything traditional Britain had seen. At the centre of the mall was a large cavernous space where people would ordinarily mingle. It was bordered on all sides by shops. And so the ordination service was held at the heart of this commercial centre, much to the excitement of the media and the curiosity of the shoppers.

It therefore strikes me today that on this occasion of the celebration of Spirit!Fest we meet here at the Cathedral. Here we celebrate the ancient beauty and architectural wonder of the 19th century that stands at the centre of this city; we sing music that expresses the beauty of creation and the wonder of God's magnanimous activity; we offer prayers to God in a young nation that is struggling to find its true character and to assure fullness of human life to all its people.. We gather at the Annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, perhaps an insignificant city in the larger scheme of things, but one which nonetheless has shaped the character of this nation through the violent encounters of black Xhosa inhabitants and the white settler communities from Europe at that time. And so this is called variously, the Frontier Town or the Settler City, or more appropriately perhaps, Makana Town!

But the arts are about possibility and insight; its about appreciation and discrimination. (Grammatically, I am never quite sure whether in referring to "the arts" collectively, we should use a singular or plural..!) It is about the imagination and beauty and the aesthetics. In all that art is about being human. The arts express our artistic talent but they also are a medium of communicating our moods, feelings and sentiment. It expresses the wholeness of our being as humans. In the classic understanding of Anglo-Catholicism, gothic aesthetics were to be part and parcel of the Catholic revival in the late 19th Century Church of England as against the austere and dull and disapproving rigidity in worship descriptive of God. Beauty in worship, colour and style in vestments, design and artistic talent, architecture, stained glass and woodcarvings, all express and symbolise the God of joy, various art forms that bring into the heart of the worship life of the community, the minds and experiences of the people of faith. This is, as Ian Henderson puts it, "an understanding of God's self-disclosure of himself to humanity with the Divine truth of the Incarnation..."¹ The arts at their best should be about the revelation of God in the beauty of holiness.

¹ *The Renewal of the Catholic Social Tradition; A Jubilee Group Paper, 1976.*

And so King David was expressing himself in exuberant joy, with song and dance and with musical instruments. It was for him a moment of joy because the presence of the Lord had to be celebrated; that the ark of God had come to dwell in the midst of human life, and that God was to be welcomed in words and song and dance – in liturgy, that showed both reverence, supplication and yet oneness with God. That is the remarkable thing about the arts; that capacity to bring together various elements of the human personality – the mind and the heart in an integrated fashion. They celebrated and danced because they were moved by something greater than themselves, and they exhibited the joy that was embedded in their hearts.

But joy can also be in the midst of sadness. The experience of Uzzah was both unexpected and a shocking tragedy. He had put out his hand to steady the oxen, and he was struck down dead. It was painful to find that on such an occasion God would reach out in anger. They were quite confident that this was the act of God. It caused them fear and trembling, and uncertainty about the future. To King David, he was angry against God – for this undeserved punishment. And yet, it was necessary that they be made aware that God was in their midst, and that God was no mere toy to be carried about at will, to be shoved in and out. David's reaction was not unexpected. He then redirected the ark away from his home to that of one of his counselors. It was not unusual that the king be protected from danger, and that his counselors must be prepared to risk their own lives to protect the life of the king. From anger and fear and uncertainty, David then finds himself jealous because the Lord had blessed the home of Obed-edom the Gittite who was entrusted with the stewardship of the ark of the Lord. David had wished the blessings for his own City of David. And he fetched the ark of the Lord, made sacrifices, and once again danced, sang songs and celebrated with the people of God.

The arts in whatever medium are a means of expressing the inexpressible, to externalize the inner being, and give flesh to the soul. This also means that by means

of art and colour, music arrangement and tone we give voice to the voiceless. I love jazz. I love the freeplay and the imagination that goes into the partnership and interplay between instruments and sometimes with voice. One can understand how human experience is brought into that act of freedom and improvisation, something that Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses this way: “This music, (writing about the Art of Fugue) take up the ‘material’ by which ‘our’ lives have been constructed, in order to process it, to play with it, and finally to bring it – as a ‘fragment’ – before the throne of the Lord. Perhaps, this an indication of a “fulfillment beyond the limits of human achievement”.² The arts stretch for us the limits of possibility, and extend the imagination so that we may see that which is hidden, and sometimes give voice to the voiceless. Charles Wesley captures this idea of the holy in that great hymn, “Love divine” which rather sublimely ends with a vision of heaven where the saints are “lost in wonder, love and praise...”

In my view it is vital that we never allow censorship, or be concerned about the discomfort of politicians, or the sensitivities of the religious. We must never stultify creativity by bannings, vandalism or violence, or threats. Censorship is a denial of the truth, truth about human nature, and about the human experience. Of course, art and poetry, and music are also about taste and appreciation. We may not love the same music, or be riveted to ecstasy by the same piece of art, or entranced by the same dance moves. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Art is about life as it is lived and as it is expressed. It is also the celebration of beauty and joy, and it brings pain and inadequacy of human fulfillment into celebration and reaching out in struggle. That is the reason that Michal watching her husband leaping and dancing “despised him in her heart”. It was because she watched the indignity and inappropriate behaviour of the King, her husband; but moreso, it was because her own imagination and empathy did not reach as far as where David was. It expressed the limitations of her own proximity to the God of David. We must let the arts flourish.

² Lynn Holness & Ralf K Wustenberg (Eds): THEOLOGY IN DIALOGUE: The Impact of the Arts & Science on Contemporary religious Thought; 2002; David Philip, Claremont, 41.

The word that Paul uses to express that sense of abundance and plenitude is “excel”. The national Arts festival is the celebration of excellence: “Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us – see that you excel in this gracious work also...” (2 Cor 8:7). This work of grace, is charitable giving for the relief of human suffering, sharing what has been freely given by God in order to give joy to those who lack the means of life. My sense is that that is what the arts do. They give us the possibility of knowing the experiences and cultures of others, and to enter the thinking and human experience which we share, and to celebrate our common humanity. That was what King David was doing, and dare I say, that was the meaning behind the ordination at the centre of the shopping mall.

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Cathedral of St Michael & St George

GRAHAMSTOWN

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