

“The music of heaven” - Christmas

I love dancing but I confess that as a priest I choose my opportunities carefully. A few years ago I had a wedding of friends in Bury St Edmunds. At the reception afterwards the band was great and feeling myself to be in a safe environment I spent most of the night on the dance floor. Two days later, on a Monday morning, I woke to severe abdominal pains and immediately self-diagnosed appendicitis. But not wishing to hang around in a hospital unnecessarily I 'phoned a doctor friend to get a second opinion. 'No,' he said 'the location of your pain is too high for appendicitis. It sounds potentially muscular to me. What have you been doing over the weekend?' I told him, including the wedding. 'Ah, that's it,' he said. 'You are suffering from excessive dancing.'

Not all of us can dance, not all of us like dancing - probably because we don't feel confident - but we all respond to music. We hear a beat and our fingers tap; we are on our own with the radio and we are tempted to conduct the orchestra; we hear the song and we sing along - not knowing the words cannot stop us. Music is natural to us; we respond with our whole selves.

As you probably know, there are writings from around the time of Jesus, which purport to be inspired by God but both the Jewish people and the Church rejected as not so. One of them is the Book of Enoch. Its provenance is dubious but it makes an interesting claim. It describes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and says that their punishment involved not only banishment but a very particular type of deprivation: no longer would they be able to hear the songs of the angels. And it is certainly true that throughout the proper Old Testament we never hear the angels sing until tonight in the countryside outside Bethlehem. For the first time, men hear the music of Heaven and it drives them to seek out a new-born baby.

The thing about dancing is that to do it well you have to get inside the music. You and the beat and the rhythm become one. And in doing so it is not that the music takes you over but rather it allows you to be free. The moves and the steps are not limiting but liberating.

And the music of Heaven has not stopped since that first Christmas night but is now heard not from the mouths of angels but in the words and actions of their Creator and King, Jesus Christ. By what he said and did he taught us how to dance to the music of heaven; he taught us the gracefulness of kindness, the poise of patience and the difficult steps of forgiveness. And in doing so he did not try to make us something we are not but rather he liberated us to be ourselves. To hear the music of Heaven and dance to it like Christ is not to be forced to be good but shown how to be fully alive.

Now if you haven't given much time to dancing some of your muscles will ache at first but that's OK - it shows they are being properly exercised. And, if we choose to start living as we were made to, it will hurt at first but that's OK - it shows that our heart and will are strengthening. The little boy we celebrate tonight wasn't born to leave us as we are; he came to shake everything up and change the world, to change us. So let's listen to Heaven's music, shake a leg and get dancing and then we shall never be freer - all because of our Bethlehem babe.