

15 July 2018

Preachers: Revd Dr JOHN LAMPARD & JUDITH LAMPARD

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| Hymns: | 335 | Rejoice the Lord is King |
| | 516 | What shall I do my God to love? |
| | 250 | Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult |
| | 247 | Lord of the Dance |
| | 513 | Take this moment, time and space |

Readings: Psalm 24 (StF 806)
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Mark 6:14-29

Sermon Part 1: "Sorrow and Joy"

In this place we often, quite rightly, remember with gratitude Susanna Wesley and her two sons, John and Charles. Rarely though do we mention the name of the woman who shares John's tomb, here in our graveyard behind the Chapel. Do you know her name? Do you know when she died?

On the obelisk it merely says '**Also Mrs Martha Hall, sister of John Wesley, 1706-1791.**' The reason I mention Martha today, is that last Wed 12th July was the 227th Anniversary of her death and next Wed 19th July will be the 227th Anniversary of her burial. She lived just four months after John died and she was the last surviving Wesley sibling. I expect you have seen the eloquent memorial to John Wesley, but the tomb originally also had words of appreciation of Martha's life. What were they? Why are they not there now?

Before I answer those questions, I would like to tell you a little about Martha's life, and why I think she is a model for us, who also want to be faithful Christians.

In the 20 years between 1690 and 1710, Susannah Wesley had 19 children, only 10 of whom survived to adulthood. Martha (often called Patty by her family) was the 8th of these survivors, 3 yrs younger than John, and 1 yr older than Charles. She was intelligent, serious, and devout even as a girl. Martha married a Church of England clergyman, Westley Hall, known to her brothers since their Oxford days.

But very soon her husband lost his Christian faith, Tried to make Martha lose her faith, was unfaithful to her, had a child by another woman. and eventually, as John Wesley records in his Journal, 'Mr Hall... turned both me and my sister out of doors.' So homeless and destitute, Martha went to live with her older sister Emilia in accommodation provided by their brother John at West St Chapel, London.

Martha had had by then 10 children, 9 of whom died in infancy, and one who had lived to the age of 14 before dying of smallpox. Despite such overwhelming sorrow, Martha's faith was strong, and her diaries show the depth of her spiritual life. She was committed to 'consider each day what the Lord requires of me.'

Martha was a most welcome visitor to the famous Dr Samuel Johnson's home, and it seems she introduced both her brothers John and Charles to him. Charles said 'it was surprising how he (Dr J) would listen to her, hear her interrogation and even her venturing to differ from him...' When Dr Johnson spoke of the unhappiness of human life, she gently chided him 'Doctor, you have always lived among the wits, not the saints.' She said the saints 'were most likely to seek true happiness, and find the pearl of great price.'

Charles Wesley also gives us a clue to Martha's generosity saying it was useless 'to give her any money to add to her comforts, because she always gives it away to some person poorer than herself.'

It was said that young people chose to talk to Martha about their faith and discipleship, They appreciated her personal faith, her gentle reproof of sin, and the kindness she showed them.

John Wesley wrote to his niece Ann Jarvis in Philadelphia, USA, that her aunt Martha '**is just as she was, a very young old woman**'. (Now that's a compliment I personally would like to have!) On her deathbed Martha spoke of the joy she felt at the thought of meeting her loved ones in heaven. The hymn at her funeral was 'Away with our sorrow and fear, we shall soon recover our home...the house of our Father above.'

Earlier I spoke of the missing words of Martha's tombstone and I can now tell you: they were from Proverbs 31:26. 'She opened her mouth with wisdom: and in her tongue is the law of kindness' When repair work was done on the tomb, perhaps in 1828, - the text was destroyed and not put back.

Martha also had a long, most appreciative obituary in the highly regarded 'Gentleman's Magazine'. In contrast to that of her brother Charles, three years earlier, which had merely said, 'Aged 81, Charles Wesley, brother to the celebrated Mr John Wesley: the joint founders of the sect called Methodists,' Martha's obituary recognised her qualities and was a fitting tribute to her life. 'In the City-road, in her 84th year, widow of Rev Mr Hall and last surviving sister of Revs John and Charles Wesley. She was equally distinguished by piety, understanding and sweetness of temper. Her sympathy for the wretched, and her bounty even to the worthless, will eternalise her name in better words than this.'

I think it is a shame that Martha's memorial words 'She opened her mouth with wisdom: and in her tongue is the law of kindness' were destroyed and not replaced on her gravestone. But in the long run, it really doesn't matter. We know them now and we have Martha's example of facing sorrow, holding true to her faith, never losing hope in the God of love, and in the certainty and joy of eternal life. What a challenge and what an example to us!

I wonder, when we die, what will be written on our gravestones, and more importantly, in the hearts and lives we have touched. Martha Hall is just one of the Methodist forebears who can influence the way we live our lives – enduring sorrow, and on the pilgrimage of faith finding, and helping others to find, Joy. Such people are saints – and, as St Paul reminds us, we are **all** called to be saints.

When I was young, I was taught this rhyme. I think it is still apposite:

'We are writing a Gospel, a chapter each day,
By deeds that we do, and words that we say.
People read what we write, whether faithless or true,
Say what is the Gospel according to you?' AMEN

Sermon Part 2: "Joy and Sorrow"

In spite of the joyous dancing and singing by members of the Ghana Fellowship, my dancing days are definitely over. Well, to be honest they never really bloomed. As an introverted, self-conscious, white, middle-class teenager, going on the dance floor was always agony. Later in life I would shuffle around if Judith encouraged my participation in a dance. And then came the dreaded criticism of causing embarrassment to our children by 'Dad Dancing', let alone the even worse thought of embarrassing my grandchildren with 'Grandpa Dancing'. This definitely drew the curtains on my dancing career.

These thoughts came to mind when I read the two Bible readings for today. In the Old Testament we read of the joy of David as he danced before the Ark of the Covenant, and in the New Testament we read of the dance by Herodias, which led to the gruesome death of John the Baptist. Two contrasting dances, one a dance of joyous life and faith; the other a seductive dance which was used to procure a brutal murder. A dance of joy and a dance of sorrow.

We read how David brought the Ark of God from Baal-judah, (somewhere North of Jerusalem) where it had been kept, to his new capital city, Jerusalem. Just a bit of background. The Ark of God, sometimes called the Ark of the Covenant is something of a mystery. We know it was a box made of wood, but we don't know its dimensions and we don't know what it contained, although tradition said it held the two stones on which the Ten Commandments were written. What we do know is that it was a sacred shrine suitable for a travelling people. It could be carried on two long poles, or on a bullock cart. Wherever the Israelites were, in the wilderness or moving around the promised land, if the Ark was with them God was with them. It symbolised God's sacred presence with them. Here is the Ark; God is with us.

Perhaps a sort of modern parallel is the use of the royal standard. Wherever the Queen is staying, Buckingham Palace, Windsor, or Balmoral, the royal standard flies. Here the Queen is with us. For the Israelites the Ark said, here God is with us.

After many years of difficulties King David had finally captured and set up his rule in his new capital city Jerusalem. He erected a tent there a temple (this was before a permanent temple was built by his son Solomon); and leading a great and excited procession David accompanied the Ark of God into his new capital city. There was shouting and sounds of rejoicing led by King David. He was dressed in the solemn sacred robes of a priest (he was both priest and king) and we read, 'David danced before the Lord with all his might'. And then we read that his wife, Michal, 'looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart'.

How we use our bodies in worship is always controversial. I remember the horror felt by some people in the early 1960s when, under the influence of the Church of South India, we re-introduced into our liturgy the ancient practice of passing the Peace. There was visible shock in some congregations that we should be required to 'touch' each other in worship. Today in some congregations there is frequently dancing, joyous movement and free expression of our physical response to a sense of the presence of God. And our Ghana Fellowship members are a wonderful expression of this. You may or may not want to join in, but if you don't two words of warning. Never adopt the response of David's wife and look on with a despising heart. Second, and this is a comfort to me, remember that you can dance in your heart. Even the rather formal Charles Wesley could write:

My God I am thine, what a comfort divine
What a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine!
In the heavenly lamb thrice happy I am,
And my heart it doth dance at the sound of his name.

Some of us, whose dancing days are over, still gladly dance before the Lord in our hearts. I invite all of you to join in that sort of joyful dancing in the heart!

David's dance was the dance of joy; but in the New Testament Mark tells us of a dance of sorrow, a dance of death. John the Baptist had been imprisoned, as many political and religious leaders are today, for criticising the authorities, in his case King Herod Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great who attempted to kill the infant Jesus. Like father like son. Herod Antipas has married Herodias his brother Philip's wife and John had pointed out publicly that it was not lawful.

Herodias's daughter (also called Herodias according to some accounts, but Salome in others), danced before Herod at some event and 'pleased him' (we are left to imagine what the pleasure was) but he wildly offered her up to half his kingdom. You can bet that if she had claimed half his kingdom he would have found a way around avoiding it. She asked her mother what she should ask for and this was her mother's chance of revenge on John. 'Ask for the head of John the Baptist'. This request was brutally carried out, and afterwards his disciples laid his body in a tomb.

For John the Baptist, Herodias's dance was a dance of sorrow, a dance that led to his death. There is an ancient Christian tradition, dating from the Middle Ages of the danse macabre, the dance of death. It is based on the awareness that we will all die. In a traditional formal dance the women sat around the walls of the dance-floor and the men went up to a woman inviting her to dance with him. A woman did not know when she would be asked to dance. By etiquette she could not refuse a request, and had to get up and dance. According to this tradition of the danse macabre we are all finally invited by death into our last dance, the dance of death. It is an invitation we cannot refuse.

How do you feel about the dance of death? Each of us will be invited at some time, and we cannot refuse. Again delving back into Christian history there is a tradition of Christians welcoming death for themselves. Of course there is pain and sorrow for those who survive the death of a loved one. But Christian faith today is in danger of

losing sight of what Paul quoted, 'Death where is your sting? Where grave your victory?' We live in a culture more anxious to keep people alive than to ensure a good death. If you fear the dance of death, how about, in quiet moments repeating Paul's words, 'Death where is your sting? Where grave your victory?'

The hymn writer Sidney Carter, wrote a controversial hymn which was selected for one hymn book, then dropped, then re-instated in our latest hymn book which uses the imagery of dance. Instead of the one who invites us to dance, the danse macabre, death itself, Sidney Carter says the one who invites you to dance is Christ himself. He is the Lord of the Dance. He will come to you and say, 'Will you dance with me?'

Thank goodness you do not have to be a dancer with physical skills to dance the dance of Jesus Christ. In Carter's imagery in death he takes you up, whirls you round, not into death but into life eternal. We are invited in death to dance with Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Dance.

They cut me down and I leapt up high;
I am the life that will never, never die;
I'll live in you if you live in me;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

Even for a non-dancer like me I find that so attractive my toes start jiggling. Thanks be to God, Amen.