



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 3

Will You Come and Follow Me? An Adult Lenten Study on Hymns

I Danced in the Morning (Lord of the Dance)

Introduction

In last week's study of "Will You Come and Follow Me," we considered the promise, challenge, and risk associated with answering Christ's summons. When we sing that hymn, pledging to turn and follow Christ, we cannot remain inert. Turning and following both require movement, moving away from patterns and practices of our former selves and moving toward God in our life as disciples. This week our journey beckons us to explore a hymn in which dance embodies the interplay between God and us: "I Danced in the Morning (Lord of the Dance)" by Sydney Carter.

The Old Testament includes references to dancing in which the Hebrews expressed exuberance over Jehovah's activity in their lives: David danced before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6) and Miriam led the women in dance (Exod. 15). The psalms contain several exhortations to include dancing as part of our praise (Pss. 149:3, 150:4). The Hebrews also lamented those times in which their dancing ceased (Lam. 5:15) and they hoped for the promise of restoration (Jer. 31:4, 13).

While the New Testament does not explicitly support dancing, it does not condemn it. Some scholars believe that the dance in worship was pervasive during the First and Second Temple periods and continued in the earliest Christian worship when rejoicing could be

understood as synonymous with dancing. This stems from an Aramaic term for "rejoice" that also means "dance."¹ Based on that premise, a first-century Christian might have understood an implied presence of dancing in a passage calling people to "rejoice and be glad" (Matt. 5:12).

As the early Christian church separated from its Jewish heritage and came under persecution, dance as a worship expression diminished. However, there remains some evidence of dancing in the writings of church founders. Ambrose (340–397), Bishop of Milan, wrote:

Everything is right when it springs from the fear of the Lord. Let's dance as David did. Let's not be ashamed to show adoration of God. Dance uplifts the body above the earth into the heavens. Dance bound up with faith is a testimony to the living grace of God. He who dances as David dances, dances to grace.²

Later, the medieval church opposed dancing, yet the practice of carol dancing still existed. In fact, carol derives from an old French term *carole*, meaning dance. These were folk dances performed in rings or circles with the dancers holding hands or interlocking arms. As the term was eventually applied to folk songs

tracing the life of Christ, it developed a stanza/refrain structure. The etymology of “stanza” reveals that it originally meant a standing or stopping place. In carol dances, a leader would sing the stanzas of a carol with people standing and listening; then all would sing and dance the refrain. The stanzas told the story and the refrain was the exuberant response to the story. “The First Noel” and “Angels We Have Heard on High” are carols featuring the stanza/refrain structure.

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“I Danced in the Morning” could be considered a modern carol, as it borrows from the folk tradition of the carol and spins a vision of lively dancing. In fact, it has been compared to an older English carol, “Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day.” Both trace the life of Christ, both tell the story in first person, and both feature the stanza/refrain format.

Sydney Carter: Pacifist and Poet

Sydney Bertram Carter (1915–2004) was an English Quaker born in Camden Town (London). He studied at the charity school founded by Christ’s Hospital and Islington’s Montem Street London County Council School. Carter spent his life in a city where, from early childhood, he heard many styles of music and enjoyed a wide variety of musical experiences: hymn-singing in daily chapel at school, going to local music halls with his father, participating in community music sings, attending classical music concerts, and listening to gramophone recordings. As a result, he developed an eclectic taste in music, being particularly fond of English folk music. At Balliol College, Oxford, he studied history and wrote poetry. Although his career initially led him into teaching, he continued to pursue his love of music through songwriting, especially folk music. As a committed pacifist, he served with the Friends’ Ambulance Unit in the Middle East during World War II. This service exposed him to folk music of other cultures, which influenced his later songwriting.³

After the war, Carter worked for the British Council, resettling refugees in England and teaching in Germany,

Spain, and Poland. In the 1960s and 1970s, he became a leading figure in the English folk music revival. He began reading his poetry and performing his songs in London pubs, singing alongside folk musicians such as Pete Seeger and Judy Collins.⁴ “I Danced in the Morning” is a product of that season of his life. His obituary in the *Telegraph* speaks to the hymn’s success:

From the moment he wrote [“Lord of the Dance”] in 1963 the number’s success spread throughout the English-speaking world, entering the standard collection *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and becoming a firm favourite of church congregations, folk camps and school assemblies. It provided the theme for Michael Flatley’s highly popular show of the same name and, today, is frequently used at marriages, baptisms and even funerals.⁵

Ironically, the hymn’s success astonished Carter, who thought the church would view it as heretical and reject it. Throughout his life, Carter made notable contributions to both the secular and sacred music worlds, writing hymns and composing music for theater and television.

Sadly, Carter fell victim to Alzheimer’s disease. Longtime friend Rabbi Lionel Blue wrote:

Sydney was a big man in every sense, and remained so even after Alzheimer’s had severed much of his communication with the world. Our contact was a thin thread of memory and his songs. I would start singing them and he would joyfully join in, and for a short while we were one again. We squeezed hands and I would leave him as he continued singing . . . he was an ecumenical Quaker, a fighter against all forms of prejudice, a friend of Jews and all victims of persecution. He was a ‘one off.’⁶

The Story as Dance

“I Danced in the Morning” is a modern recounting of events in Christ’s life, surprisingly told in first person. Carter writes about his equally surprising choice of the dance metaphor in a hymn:

I see Christ as the Incarnation of that piper who is calling us. He dances that shape and pattern

which is at the heart of our reality. I sing of the dancing pattern in the life and words of Jesus.

Whether Jesus ever leaped in Galilee to the rhythm of a pipe or drum I do not know. We are told that David danced (and as an act of worship too), so it is not impossible. The fact that many Christians have regarded dance as a bit ungodly (in church, at any rate) does not mean that Jesus did.⁷

Carter's pervasive use of dance in each of the five stanzas imparts energy surging throughout the hymn. Like all good stories, this one starts from the beginning with the first stanza spanning eons, recalling a timeless Christ who was present before creation. It is interesting that we sing of Jesus dancing "in" the moon, stars, and sun rather than "on." Carter's choice of preposition conveys an immanent Christ who is actively involved and not merely a casual observer. The Bethlehem birth, the incarnation, further manifests Christ's involvement with humanity.

Stanzas 2 and 3 recount significant events from Christ's ministry: confrontations with established religion, calling of disciples, miracles, and crucifixion. Carter recites events that were both high and low points in Christ's ministry. Conventional wisdom dictates Christ's ministry risked failure when scribes, Pharisees, and other holy people of established religion declined the invitation to dance. Nevertheless, there were those willing to accept the call, risking all to follow Jesus. The dance went on! This happens in our own spiritual lives as we grow and mature in faith and then, predictably, falter. However, the dance still goes on and the invitation is never withdrawn.

The tone changes in the fourth stanza with the events of the crucifixion. The second line, with its reference to Christ taking on the sin of the world, describes how difficult it is to be faithful in dire circumstances. Not even death stops the dance. When we face challenges in managing life or experience personal calamity or flagging faith, we can, with God's help, persist, knowing the dance continues. In singing this stanza, try mirroring the mood by singing it in a minor key until the refrain.

A vision of ecstatic, reenergized movement of resurrection replaces the despair from the previous stanza. The Lord of the Dance extends an extraordinary

invitation to us: to live "in" Christ. Again, the preposition used here is important; it is much more than the promise of Christ being with us, but it is *in* God that we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Lines of Communication

Carter employs the familiar song structure of stanza (verse)/refrain used not only in carols but also in other types of congregational song. When singing hymns, pay attention to the voice of the text; that is, who is speaking? What are the lines of communication in a hymn? Hymn writers have several options at their disposal. For example, a text in which we are addressing God is a human-to-God line of communication. When we sing "Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days,"

One of the reasons this hymn proved popular was Carter's choice of tune: SIMPLE GIFTS, a nineteenth-century American Shaker melody.

we are addressing our Lord. The first four stanzas of "Will You Come and Follow Me" are Jesus summoning us, or God-to-human. In the fifth stanza of that hymn, we address Jesus in our response. A third line of communication commonly used in congregational song is human-to-human, the type of text in which we sing with each other about God. "I Danced in the Morning" fuses God-to-human and human-to-human perspectives. In the stanzas, Jesus retells his life events using the first person "I." The refrain shifts from "I" to third person "he" as we respond, encouraging one another to dance our faith.

Singing This Modern Carol

One of the reasons this hymn proved popular was Carter's choice of tune: SIMPLE GIFTS, a nineteenth-century American Shaker melody. The Shakers were a branch of Quakers that was first established in England in the eighteenth century. By 1774, they had moved to America where they lived in celibate communities. Noted for their ecstatic worship, they were sometimes called the Shaking Quakers, hence the name Shakers. Carter

notes, “dancing was, for them, a spiritual activity.” He adapted their tune rather than composing a new one:

I could have written another for ‘Lord of the Dance’ (some people have), but this was so appropriate that it seemed a waste of time to do so. Also, I wanted to salute the Shakers.

And Carter had an interesting idea about singing his text:

Sometimes, for a change, I sing the whole song in present tense. ‘I dance in the morning when the world is begun . . .’ It’s worth a try.⁸

Shall We Dance?

Although it might seem strange or even inappropriate to consider dancing on our Lenten journey, there is a dance step associated with Lent: the tripudium. It consisted of three steps forward followed by one step backward and was used in processions or circle dances. We can create a simple dance using this step, one fashioned after the medieval carol dances. The entire group forms a circle (or, if the group is large, concentric circles) and faces the leader in the center, who will sing the stanzas. At the refrain, turn to the right and take three steps forward and one step backward, repeating this pattern three more times. Everyone sings the refrain while dancing the tripudium.

The tripudium reflects our Lenten journey: as we progress steadily through this season, we look back to reflect on the great love shown to us. The author expresses a similar idea.

Faith is more than language or theology. Faith is the response to something which is calling us from the timeless part of our reality. Faith may be encouraged by what has happened in the past . . . but the only proof of it is in the future. Scripture and creeds may come to seem incredible, but faith will still go dancing on. This, I believe, is the kind of faith Christ commanded.⁹

Conclusion

As we look back on Jesus’ life, we are encouraged by his presence at Creation, his bold ministry, and his triumph over temptation. We are excited by his summons to fol-

low. In this hymn we also regret missed opportunities for those who do not accept the invitation and reflect on the sorrow and despair of Christ’s death, and we are reminded that through faith Christ triumphed over death. As we dance toward our future in Christ, wherever it may be, we know that God leads, and for that we give praise and glory.

Endnotes

1. Doug Adams, “Moving beyond Words for Dance: A Bibliographical Essay on ‘Dance and Religion’ Studies Using Form Criticism,” *Arts* no. 2–3 (Winter/Summer 1989–1990): 24.
2. Ambrose quoted in Patti Amsden, “A Brief History of Dance in Worship,” *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, ed. Robert Webber (Nashville: Start Song Publishing Group, 1994), 721.
3. Nicholas Williams, “Biography,” in *Lord of the Dance and Other Songs and Poems* (London: Stainer and Bell, 2002), iii.
4. “Sydney Carter Obituary,” *The Telegraph*, Mar. 16, 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1456932/Sydney-Carter.html>.
5. Ibid.
6. Lionel Blue, “Introduction,” in *Lord of the Dance and Other Songs and Poems* (London: Stainer and Bell, 2002), ii.
7. Sydney Carter, “Lord of the Dance,” in *Lord of the Dance and Other Songs and Poems* (London: Stainer and Bell, 2002), 4.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

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