

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 31st July

And did those Feet ...

Dancing is most usually seen as exuberant and joyful, but it articulates the entire spectrum of human emotions, encompassing everything from freedom to deepest loss and death itself.

The Celtic harvest festival Lughnasadh on 1 August takes its name from the Irish Lugh. It has been celebrated until recently at wakes, fairs and summer revels in Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ireland. Dancers would whirl around an effigy of the harvest goddess, touching her garlands or snatching a ribbon from her hair to ensure fruitful, fertile fields for the next year. This feast is the backdrop chosen by Irish playwright Brian Friel as the setting for his beautiful play *Dancing at Lughnasa*. It features five sisters in their County Donegal cottage in 1936. Things are not good for them. Disgrace, penury and a great sadness are stifling their souls.

At the end of the play, in a most extraordinary burst of combined energy, the women release their profound emotional suppression. Their celebrated dance gives a glimpse of the unquenchable passions that come from far beyond words, far beyond the sisters' kitchen window. Some kind of sacramental shutter was thrown open and, for a moment, unbidden, a suppressed wildness, desperation even, burst free from the shadows of their souls. It ended with a terrible stillness. We dance in our distress. We dance to survive. The American poet Mary Oliver once encountered an old man in 'a headdress of feathers' who 'danced in a kind of surly rapture' in 'Two Kinds of Deliverance' she writes:

*As for the pain of others,
of course it tries to be
abstract, but then*

*there flares up out of a vanished wilderness, like fire,
still blistering: the wrinkled face
of an old Chippewa smiling,
hating us,
dancing for his life.*

People dance for many reasons. We dance our joy, our freedom, our worship, our deepest loss. Recently, on an empty day, I went to see Billy Elliot again. At the end of his disastrous interview at the Royal School of Ballet, he was given a last chance. They asked him what he felt when he danced. 'It sort of feels good', he said. 'It starts stiff and that, but once I get going then I – like – forget everything and sort of disappear. Like I feel a change in my whole body. There's fire in me. I'm just there, flyin' like a bird, like electricity, yeah, like electricity.' 'When grace enters,' wrote W.H. Auden, 'humans must dance.' and when does grace enter? It enters, when, for instance, I make the choice each morning to live freely today rather than exist like a victim, to run the way of beauty rather than stumble along the blind way. When I begin to believe that is always holding on to me, no matter what – I want to dance. A Kairos time and timing for dancing is when we begin, after many years, to live our unlived lives, so as to die without regret. We create a tiny dance floor when we hold off, even for a split second, these dark and deadly thoughts, allowing our souls a sliver of saving light. We can dance in that space because in it we have regained our blessed balance, our divine energy. This space may last the length of a human breath, but it hides and reveals the heart of redemption.