



## Easter Scenes

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915),  
*Dancer*, 1913, (posthumous cast, 1967),  
Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

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Helen Orr

*Genesis 11: 1–9 Acts 2: 1–21*

Pentecost – it's the day we celebrate the spirit of God coming down and transforming the disciples, like a rushing wind, tongues of fire, and the day we celebrate God's Holy Spirit being available to the world and to us here now today. So what are these images trying to convey? Movement – the spirit is somehow on the move, drawing us into God's presence, like a dance, inviting us to take part.

As a child my favourite song was 'Lord of the dance', which I thought went '... Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the lord of the dance settee, and I'll lead you all, wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance settee'. It was years later I came to understand that he wasn't 'the lord of the dance settee', or any type of sofa, which I had always assumed. No he wasn't jumping up and down on old furniture. I hadn't understood the words, I learnt the song as a very small girl before I could read and eventually on reading the lyrics I realised my mistake. It was 'I am the Lord of the dance, *said he*' ... not *settee*.

It was my first sample of Chinese whispers, *my* early version of my own personal Babel – the confusion or misunderstanding of words that today's Genesis story expresses.

This idea of God though as the dancer, the Lord of all dance, welcoming us all in to the divine presence, has remained a strong image of God's spiritual presence with me. In part, because it is a good metaphor for the spirit of God on the move. And also because it is embracing and energising, intimate and kind, which *is* the spirit of God – it fosters community – as opposed to scary or loud, which I imagine flames and wind can be. So being filled with the spirit can also be a quiet, still assurance that God loves you and those around you. It doesn't need to be loud. It can be a gentle delicate dance, a ballet, like the dancer stepping down.

So I sit in the quiet sun-filled room at Kettle's Yard, a round, ancient table reflecting the light on the *Dancer*. She is a sculpture – the figure of movement. Is she rising or is she falling? Is she about to twist in or step away? Will she turn? Will she turn to look at me? Can she?

‘The wind blows where it wills, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ As John’s gospel says. (John 3: 8) The *Dancer* embodies this mystery of spirit through movement – an unspoken sense in the heart, the murmur of the still quiet voice, the gentle wind, the spirit is on the move. Perichoresis, the name the Cappadocian fathers gave to describe the interplay of the Trinity: making space, a dance, father, son and spirit, like a figure of eight intertwined, separate and yet together – one possible interpretation of this interplay of the Trinity.

Gaze at the *Dancer* now on the service sheet. Is she moving? She is almost moving.

Influenced by Rodin, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the artist who fashioned this fluid figure out of clay in 1913, was an artist whose visionary ideas were cut short, far too soon, by the first world war where he sadly, like so many others, lost his young life at just 24. However, his impact from those few short years of creative work became huge and went far beyond him.

So I have chosen this piece because we can never under estimate our influence if we give ourselves wholeheartedly to our ideas and visions and if we allow God’s penetrating spirit to enable us to fulfil them. Gaudier-Brzeska did just that in his art. His chance discovery by Jim Ede, when Gaudier-Brzeska works were dumped on his desk at the Tate Gallery – Jim was simply asked what he wanted ‘to do’ with them. Jim recognised them immediately to be the work of a genius. He promoted Gaudier-Brzeska until he became the well-deserved figure in art he is today, writing a book about him, *Savage Messiah*, and putting a collection of this works and sketches in Kettle’s Yard which are still there.

So I choose the *Dancer*, the work of this visionary genius, whose clay form was not cast until the 1960’s long after his lifetime. Based on the painter, Nina Hamnett, who danced in the studios of Paris, the *Dancer* has a timeless quality of perpetual movement, an eternal beauty about her. I choose her too because she is also accessible: you can all go and see her for yourself just a mere two streets away from here any day of the week when Kettle’s Yard is open and bask in her beauty for yourself. Sculpture has a visceral quality, and needs to be seen in reality, not just looked at in the photograph before you now – no matter how well reproduced it is. Because sculpture is tactile and it is something in a sense to be seen in the flesh as it were, to be experienced.

Choosing a sculpture to embody Pentecost, feels like the Holy Spirit – we really need to experience it for ourselves rather than to just be told about it or have it explained to us. The fire, the wind, these are just metaphors for that movement that wells up in the heart when you encounter God and invite him into your heart, to dance with you. It is intimate, like the dance, it is also free and not self-conscious. The impact is in the seeing and believing and the turning again to God, allowing his love to fill us up. Daring to be open like the *Dancer* in her step. And in the case of the *Dancer*, to allow the peace of the place in which she resides to wash over you too.

Jim Ede had an open house every week because he desired many people – including all the students at Magdalene College and beyond – to enjoy the wonders of modern art mixed with everyday living and beauty in general. To know *how* you place an object in the right place of light and to realise that this is just as important as the object itself, that art could be a way of life, of expressing beauty and truth and love and encouraging others to appreciate it, that was and still is Kettle’s Yard gift to the world. The gift of Jim himself, his vision of making one’s home a place of beauty, tranquillity and hospitality.

The gift of the Spirit is in fact the ultimate gift of hospitality to us all. God giving us his life, breathing his breath into our hearts, so that we in turn may give his love, his hope and his life to those around us. The gift we are to pass on and share, echoed in the Lord's supper, giving life through bread and wine, body and blood.

Jim Ede in fact gave Kettle's Yard, and all the contents as a gift to the university even before he had moved to Edinburgh. He had only one stipulation: that everything should remain as it is – and so it does. So this *Dancer* before you will stand permanently in her current place on that ancient round table, captured by sunlight, at the perfect angle which makes her appear to dance; and the light that makes her dance will still carry on beyond my years, and possibly yours, and more students and tourists will come and go and enjoy her in the wonderful surroundings of Jim Ede's home, so generously given. The angle he has placed her at, because his eye saw where the light reflects and knew this place was hers, will continue to delight others for years and years to come.

It is his bigger vision and generosity of spirit that she also embodies – a man who discovered and promoted talents such as Gaudier-Brzeska as he found them. Gaudier-Brzeska in turn would influence others, like Henry Moore – Ede's influence going far beyond what he ever imagined it would.

The Spirit too allows us to dare to believe in something bigger than ourselves and allows us to do things 'even greater things', as Christ said, than we possibly can imagine when we allow God's Spirit in to fill us, because we enter into the eternal spirit of God whose imagination is far greater than ours can ever be, and whose courage can allow us to dare to go beyond our own comfort zones.

In Acts, the disciples go beyond theirs by speaking out God's truth in languages hitherto unknown to them. They aren't afraid to seem foolish, despite being from Galilee, with its mainly fishermen labourer population, as their accents give away. No, they press on telling their truths in languages they didn't know, trusting the Spirit to lead and guide them, ignoring the calls that they are drunk – far too early before dining anyway. Hard to imagine in these hallowed halls, where we like to appear clever and avoid speaking words that might make us look foolish, that they would press on, but the disciples weren't interested in cleverness or foolishness or what other people thought of them, just the truth that Christ had come, risen again and now his Holy Spirit was available for everyone and still is today.

Christ, the second Adam, came to save us from the original sin of humankind – the mistake seeking to be our own God, looking to ourselves for all solutions and only serving our own needs, as the Babel tower story illustrates, believing we could know more than God or do away with God altogether. The Spirit came to take our original desire to worship, away from turning inwards and worshipping the self, back outwards towards the truth that we are called to worship *God*. And in worshipping God – who is the embodiment of all love, of all community, the three-in-one God, both in and beyond the world and time, the greatest conceivable being, the one who has in fact perfected love and given us back a life, a life of communication – we too can become free to live once more an abundant life, without the constraints of what others may think of us, or whether we appear foolish or clever, free to be who God truly has intended us to be all along, simply his creatures, who love God and who God loves.

Away from the world, away from iPhones, and iPads and laptops – not that these aren't important – but beyond all media – social or otherwise – beyond all our studies and thoughts of the future, beyond that job we desire, or the book we want to publish, or the research topic we want funding for, beyond all of that there is God who loves us, just as we are right now, sitting here, before we do or attain anything more, and his Holy Spirit is a free gift for us all. That is the message of Pentecost, come join in the dance. This love that remains eternally knocking at the door of our hearts, asking to enter in, and is still there even if we never take another exam or write another sentence or, dare I say it, if we never win a Nobel prize. The spirit says we are free, like the *Dancer* – naked beautiful, created as God wished us, just to love, to be and to move in his presence, to find our dwelling place in God.

The two readings today draw on the redemptive qualities of the spirit. Genesis and the beginning of Babel: languages mingled, muddled and confused; the disintegration of community as people focus on themselves and build their tower, thinking their own works can somehow get them to heaven and so they look away from God. This is in sharp contrast with the reordering and remaking of community in Acts, where the Spirit enables uneducated men to speak in tongues they had never learned, to turn confusion into clarity, to build common understanding, to reorder languages so that everyone can understand by the power of God, just as everyone was confused by his power in the past. The Holy Spirit enters in, allowing Peter to utter words of courage and wisdom. Inspired by the Spirit the illiterate fishermen become wise orators and fearless promoters of the gospel in every language, declaring His good news. The good news that God has come into the world and lived among us, that the light is in the darkness and the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

I know sometimes the pressure of exams can make it feel as if the darkness will never be lifted and I remember all too well my own finals and the nights I sat up late cramming last-minute revision into my head, hoping against hope it would remain there in the morning. And the nightmares of thinking I had another exam to sit, which still carried on as a recurring nightmare long after the exams were over, and yet ... the bigger picture, much bigger than exams or results or anything, is the good news that we are loved and that Christ died for us whilst we were yet sinners and that the resurrection and the life has happened, the I AM has come and we are *all* invited to the party, now, today whatever our language age or culture. The invitation is there, like the dancer beckoning us on, we are offered the life-giving Spirit of God. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. As Peter quotes the prophet Joel: young men will have visions, old men will dream dreams. What are your visions? What dreams do you have? Offer them up to God and see them multiplied.

The *Dancer* to me epitomises that moment of movement, the spirit moving, our movement of soul, God moving in us and with us and for us.

So I sit in Kettle's Yard, the house that Jim Ede called home, and I watch the *Dancer* skip through the sunlight, free from the chains of fear that can hold us back, caught eternally living her steps, a memorial to Jim's vision of a way of light and life and truth. I choose her because she represents life, a moment and potential. I choose her because she is a summary of the Spirit, that movement, that choice to turn again to God that we each can dare to take, to trust once more in that love which is held out to us, in all languages, forever beckoning us to join the dance, where we too can be one with Father, Spirit and Son.