

'Holy Laughter' or Joy in the Holy Spirit

Pentecost Sunday 2016

Those of you who read the Telegraph might have seen an article this week entitled:

'Vicars urged to rein in jokes and rambling anecdotes during sermons' ...

The article began:

'The familiar ritual of congregations raising a faint titter as the Vicar tells another toe-curling joke or rambling anecdote could become a thing of the past if the findings of new research are taken to heart.'

The research in question had asked a number of people what they thought was most important in a sermon – with Biblical exposition and practical application coming far above humour and personal stories.

Quite right too – but hardly unsurprising – and of course to assume therefore that humour is somehow unimportant is completely fallacious.

Somewhat to my horror I found myself agreeing (possibly for the first time ever) with former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, when he said:

'Just two minutes of a boring sermon can be almost like geological time, it goes on forever.'

I couldn't resist seeing this research as something of a personal challenge – so here's a joke:

There was once a priest who wanted to talk to his congregation about the evils of drink. So he got into the pulpit and produced a glass of neat gin. From his pocket he produced a live worm. He placed the live worm in the neat gin, which wriggled for a few moments, before promptly dying. He noticed that this demonstration was watched with keen interest by a local vagrant of the parish, who was frequently inebriated.

The next day, he happened to meet the vagrant in the street, and he asked him if he had learnt a lesson from the sermon.

'Yes Father, I did' said the vagrant.

'What did you learn?' said the priest?

'I learnt', he replied, *'that if you've got worms – drink gin'.*

LAUGHTER IN THE BIBLE

It would be true to say that laughter is rarely mentioned in the Bible, and when it is mentioned, it is often in a negative way.

Perhaps the most famous occasion is in Genesis, when Abraham's wife Sarah, laughs when she hears the prophecy that she will have a child – and well she might, because by this point she is a very old woman. Her laughter is interpreted as derision, and a sign of her lack of faith in the promises and power of God.

In the ancient world, the uncontrollable nature of laughter may well have seemed too much like possession for comfort. Just as other uncontrollable conditions such as epilepsy or physical tics were seen as demon-possession, likewise laughter was seen in the same light. As odd as that might seem, we can sympathise with it, if you think of the times you've desperately tried not to laugh in an inappropriate context such as a meeting, laughter can feel dangerously like a force outside of yourself that is to be resisted.

In the New Testament, there is sadly no record of Jesus laughing, which isn't to say he didn't or that he didn't have a sense of humour. True, the Gospels are not slapstick, but Jesus' biting asides to the Pharisees show a keen sense of irony, there is amusingly absurd imagery in the parables, and there is much word-play. I suspect the people of Israel just had a different sense of humour from us, and so perhaps we can't see where it exists.

But if in the Old Testament, laughter might seem a bit like possession, in the New Testament, laughter could be seen as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit – for Saint Paul writing to the Galatians, joy is one of the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus himself scandalized people with his festivity, joining in and bringing people together in contexts that would have involved much singing, dancing and laughter, such as the wedding at Cana. He celebrated and rejoiced too much for the liking of the tight-lipped and humourless Pharisees. In the medieval church there was a custom in the Easter season, where the priest had to do anything they could to make the congregation laugh – even doing something completely absurd.

Perhaps that's why as a priest I've had to do some very odd things:

I was once forced to take part in a belly dancing competition – I'll let you imagine that!

And another time dressed up as a pantomime dame – with some very large balloons in my shirt.

In Christian tradition, laughter has the potential to be holy – and so does being laughed at.

I've always taken to heart Saint Paul's saying that Christians are required to be 'fools for Christ'. Much of what we say and do as Christians looks absurd and ridiculous to the rest of the world.

Making ourselves foolish is one of the risks we take as Christians; in a serious and secularised world we are apt to be laughed at by others, but we continue for the sake of Him who was mocked by soldiers with a purple robe and a fake crown.

In Shakespeare, it is the fool who in his foolishness says and does the things that others can't, and so reveals truth to all around them.

In the Book of Acts which we heard this morning, the apostles are sneered at for being drunk – but in a line that always raises a smile – Peter responds saying 'we are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only 9 o'clock in the morning'. What makes people think they are drunk is not the various languages they are speaking, but that they are talking about '*God's deeds of power*'. The apostles are filled with the joy and exuberance of the Holy Spirit and moved to talk about all that God has done for them.

JOY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Someone once said that you could always tell a proper Anglo-Catholic church if the congregation looked as miserable as sin! Thank God, that is not the case at St Michael's which is a church with much joy; in its music, liturgy and social life, but it is still something we must cultivate and pray for. Perhaps one reason why more people are not drawn to the Church generally is that Christians sometimes struggle to show their joy and a mistaken impression that church is a place of excessive solemnity. It's up to us to show that the joy of the Holy Spirit is what stops us losing hope in an often dark world.

Of course, it's important to say that being Christians does not protect you or anyone from being unhappy, sad or depressed – that is evidently untrue – but in our best moments of faith we are called to reveal a quality of joy, a wise-foolishness, a delight and a laughter that contrasts with the seriousness of secularism and the sombre nihilism of worldly creeds. This is not a superficial jollity, or a naïve and irritating positivity, but something much deeper – the delight and joy that permeates the world through the Resurrection of Christ, which has been shed abroad in our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So I suppose I'd better finish with one last joke ...

One Sunday morning, a mother shook her son awake, telling him it was time to go to church. No effect. Ten minutes later, she was back:

'Get out of bed immediately and go to church'.

'Mother, I don't want to, it's so boring! Why should I bother'.

'For two reasons' replied his mother.

*'First because you know you must go to church on Sunday'
And second, because you're the Bishop!'*

Amen.

Fr Stephen – 15 May 2016