

Laugh Out Loud

Matthew 5:21-26

5th Sunday after Epiphany

6th February 2011

The story goes that every day a woman stood on her porch and shouted, "Praise the Lord!"

And every day, her next door neighbour, an atheist, yelled back, "There is no God!"

One day the woman stood on her porch and prayed aloud, "Lord, I'm hungry. Please send me food."

The next morning she found groceries piled up on her steps, "Praise the Lord!" she shouted.

At which her neighbour jumped out from behind a bush, "I told you there was no God," he crowed triumphantly, "It wasn't your precious Lord who brought you these groceries. It was me. I was the one who bought them for you."

Undaunted, the woman shouted, "Praise the Lord! He is truly great! Not only did he send me groceries but he made the devil pay for them!"¹

How we love a funny story that everyone can laugh at and causes no offence. But wait a moment! We just laughed at a story that would cause offence to atheists! So what are you telling me? That it's OK to laugh at certain groups of people? That it's acceptable for atheists to be the butt of our jokes? What an insensitive bunch of people we are! But, of course, I'm just joking ... Or, am I? ☺

It's intriguing, isn't it, how fine a line there is these days between what's considered funny and what's insulting? Take, for instance, the remark made on Twitter a few days ago by famed fashion designer, Kenneth Cole who tried to boost his business by making a humorous connection to current events in the Middle East. "Millions are in an uproar in Cairo," he tweeted, "Rumor is they heard our new spring collection is now available online (on our website) at <http://bit.ly/KCairo-KC>."

However, Kenneth Cole's seemingly innocent and innocuous remark was quickly met with fury and indignation from many who felt that he was making light of a very serious situation. So great was the wave of criticism and controversy that he was forced to issue a statement saying, "I apologize to everyone who was offended by my insensitive tweet about the situation in Egypt. I've dedicated my life to raising awareness about serious social issues, and in hindsight my attempt at humor regarding a nation liberating themselves against oppression was poorly timed and absolutely inappropriate."²

Well, there are those like Kenneth Cole who cross the thin line of humour tactlessly and unwittingly but there are also those who make a profession of crossing it intentionally, then hold their hands up in mock amazement when their remarks cause offence. Take English comedian, Ricky Gervais, for instance, who

horrified many with his outrageously insulting remarks about some of the renowned and revered Hollywood stars. For instance, introducing Robert Downey Jr., he quipped: "He's the star of (films such as) *Iron Man*, *Two Girls and a Guy* and *Wonderboys*. He has done all those films, but many of you in this room probably know him from such facilities as the Betty Ford Clinic and Los Angeles County Jail." Not only did he say many offensive things like this, but he got away with them. And, though many were shocked and appalled at his barbed words, the strange thing is he'll probably be invited back to host the Golden Globes again next year!

At the other end of the scale from those who cross the thin line between the humorous and non-humorous, there are those who never come near the line because they have no sense of humour whatsoever. Take former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, for instance. What exasperated Thatcher's aides most of all was her inability to laugh – either at events around her, at other people, or at herself. In a recent book about her, Ferdinand Mount, her speech writer, said, "It was well-known that she was resistant to humour and often had to have jokes explained to her. But she was also indifferent to most of the tricks of paradox, ambiguity, understatement and saying the opposite of what you mean."³

I think we all know people like this who are so intense and so focused on their lives, on their work, on their family or on some particular cause or issue that consumes all their waking hours, that they are completely humourless. Crack a joke and they look at you with a blank, un-comprehending stare as if you were an alien from another planet and were speaking Klingon.⁴

The impression some writers and preachers often give of Jesus is that he was this kind of person. Humourless. Intense. Sullen. Solemn. But this is far from the truth. If one reads the Gospels with "eyes to see and ears to hear", then we begin to see a much different Jesus. A smiling Jesus. A laughing Jesus. A fun-loving Jesus. Not that he wasn't serious when he needed to be serious. But he also could enjoy the lighter side of life.⁵

In Mark's Gospel, we read that the crowds listened to Jesus with delight.⁶ And in Matthew's Gospel, we hear that the people were amazed at his teaching and were filled with awe. Could Jesus have held their attention and made such impression on them if he had not employed humour to communicate with them? Also, we know that Jesus was a big hit with the children of these times. Would they have come to him so gladly and sat around him if he hadn't encouraged them to laugh with him? Surely, anyone who deals with children at all knows that

you need a sense of humour to communicate effectively.

Now the humour Jesus employed is not immediately obvious when reading the Gospels. He didn't endeavour to be a stand-up comedian or tell jokes but rather, when teaching and preaching, he used such devices as comical ideas to make his point. For instance, when Jesus suggests to his Jewish hearers that they should leave the altar to make amends with their enemies, everyone would laugh up their sleeve at this scenario, knowing full well that they would never, ever, leave the altar under any imaginable circumstances before completing their devotions. Or what about the unforgiving servant who owed a sum of money? The figure Jesus quotes would be the size of the national debt. Or, what about the exorbitant amount of wine at the wedding feast in Cana? It was so incredibly large that it would have kept the Roman army inebriated for weeks.

Jesus also uses intentionally preposterous statements such as the camel going through the eye of the needle or the person with the plank in his eye offering to remove the speck from another's eye.

Then, very frequently, he uses paradoxes where the hearer is asked to accept simultaneously two contradictory propositions such as having to lose your life to find it or when he talks about the last being first and the first being last in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus also employs a great deal of irony in many and varied ways where his intended implication is the exact opposite of his literal words. For instance, when he decides to give his disciple, Simon, a new name, he calls him "Peter" meaning "the Rock", or the stable and predictable one. That would certainly have brought a smile to the disciples' faces because the name was the exact opposite of this rugged fisherman's well-known unstable and impetuous personality. They knew full well that Jesus was speaking tongue-in-cheek. Just like we might do when we give a 6 ft 5 ins friend the nickname "tiny".⁷

There was, though, another and deeper purpose behind the humour Jesus displayed and that was to reveal what one contemporary writer calls the "comedy of grace".⁸ By this he means all those different times when God's loving-kindness suddenly, unexpectedly, breaks through and completely turns around seemingly dead-end situations, causing people to react in wonder and delight, giving those bearing the hardest lots in life cause for laughter at the surprising change for the better in their situation.

For instance, in the parables, what could be more delightfully unexpected than the prodigal son coming home from his wayward existence to find his father welcoming him with open arms rather than chastising him?⁹ Or the wonderful twist in the tale when the last labourers hired for the vineyard find out they are getting paid exactly the same as the first.¹⁰ Or, the wounded man lying at the side of the road suddenly finding out that it is the outcast Samaritan who comes to his aid rather than one of his own kin, the priest and the Levite.¹¹

But this comedy of grace is not confined to the pages of the Bible. Jesus shows us that he can and does cause it to happen today in our own times and in our own lives. Unexpectedly, out of the blue, as people open their hearts and minds in faith and trust, his gracious love breaks into the most dead-end and impossible of situations transforming them beyond belief. Maybe it's when that financially bleak situation is suddenly turned around after years of worrying. Or a person, facing some dread disease, suddenly finds that their condition has taken an unexpected turn for the better. Or, after years of being enslaved by an addiction, someone discovers the amazing grace that sets them free. Or, a family conflict that has gone on and on for years is unexpectedly resolved and long-time enemies become reconciled.

Whatever that seemingly inevitable, that seemingly impossible, that seemingly irretrievable situation you are up against today, remember that, as you go forward with faith and trust in Jesus then, in time, you will be astonished and amazed. For whenever that man is present in your life, there is always the possibility that, just when you think all is lost, just when you think there is no road forward, just when you think there is no way out, he will surprise you so greatly that you will literally laugh out loud.

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¹ "Laughter The Best Medicine", *Reader's Digest*, February 2008, p.35

² "Kenneth Cole apologizes for tweet using Egypt protests to promote fashion line", *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2011

³ Ferdinand Mount, "The Real Mrs. T", *The Sunday Times*, April 5, 2008, p.5, extracted from Ferdinand Mount, *Cold Cream: My Early Life and Other Mistakes*, Bloomsbury, 2008

⁴ Language spoken by fictional Klingons in *Star Trek*.

⁵ Sister Rosemary CHN, *The Humour of Jesus*, The Society of St. Francis, 2000; Father Bryan, *The Humour of Jesus*, <http://www.stpetershumberston.co.uk/vicarsdesk.htm>

⁶ Mark 12:37b

⁷ Matthew 7:25; Matthew 9:8; Mark 10:13ff; Matthew 5:23; Matthew 18:24; John 2:1ff; Mark 10:25; Matthew 7:3; Mark 8:35; Matthew 20:16; Matthew 16:18

⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*, Harper & Row, New York, 1977

⁹ Luke 15:11ff

¹⁰ Matthew 20:1ff

¹¹ Luke 10:25ff