

Sheer Folly

Matthew 2:1-11
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Palm Sunday

28th March 2010

Here's this week's trivia quiz ... We know the names of many of the celebrities we watch on TV or in films or read about in magazines and newspapers. But, as often as not, the names by which we know them are not their given names at birth. Who, for instance, are the famous people that go with these names.

Let's start with some relatively easy ones to start with:

- Eldrick Woods ... Golfer, Tiger Woods
- Cassius Clay ... Boxer, Muhammad Ali
- Antonio Dominick Benedetto ... Singer, Tony Bennett
- Leslie Townes Hope ... Comedian, Bob Hope
- Norma Jean Mortensen ... Actress, Marilyn Monroe
- Richard Starkey ... Beatle, Ringo Starr
- No problem with these, but who are these people:
- Julia Elizabeth Wells ... Singer, Julie Andrews
- Frederick Austerlitz ... Dancer, Fred Astaire
- Nathan Birnbaum ... Comedian, George Burns
- Thomas Mapother IV ... Actor, Tom Cruise
- Jacob Cohen ...Comedian, Rodney Dangerfield
- Frances Gumm Singer, Judy Garland¹

I wonder if you ever watch that lovely British comedy series *The Vicar of Dibley*, often shown on PBS, about the first woman minister in a small English country church. The storyline of one of the episodes is based on the confusion surrounding the real name of a well-known celebrity.

The time of year has come to plan the annual Dibley Fair. At the parish council meeting, everyone remembers what a disaster the previous fair was. The turnout was poor and the takings did nothing to shore up the church's coffers. Geraldine, the new minister, knows that the key to a good event is to have a big name to draw the crowds. They need star power to bring the people out. When she learns that the cousin of a church member is a certain Reg Dwight, she comes up with a seemingly brilliant

plan to invite him to open the church fete because, of course, he is none other than the famous singer, musician, Elton John. Unfortunately for the Reverend Geraldine, the Reg Dwight who turns up is not Elton John but a rather dull, local amateur Blues singer/guitarist.

The pompous chairman of the parish council cannot contain his glee that this woman minister whom he detests has fallen flat on her face but, at the last minute, the day is saved for Geraldine because it just so happens that actress/singer, Kylie Minogue, turns up at the fair thinking that Elton John is going to be there. So, serendipity prevails, and the Australian superstar is invited to open the church fete and hand out the prizes – much to the delight of all the people there.

One of the recurring themes of many episodes of *The Vicar of Dibley* is that this woman minister is kind of crazy. She is always undertaking some madcap plans for something or other. She never does things in a seemingly normal way. She is always having brilliant ideas for church services and activities that are just a little off-the-wall – even though, against all the odds, they so often turn out well. Her intentions are good but many think if she could just act in a more sane and rational manner instead of constantly going off at tangents in the most impulsive way, then church life would be just a little less scary.²

Now, doesn't this reflect something of what people thought about Jesus 2000 years ago? Time and again, throughout his ministry, many seemed to think that he was somewhat deranged, if not bordering on crazy. His cause was good, they believed, but his methods were foolish. Oh, if only he would act in a more reasonable way, people thought.

Never was this more so as events developed during the first Holy Week. Things started out well on Palm Sunday, of course. Jesus was given an overwhelming welcome as he made his way through the ancient cobbled streets of the Holy City on the

back of a donkey. The crowds were ecstatic. They had heard so many good things about this man from Nazareth as he had travelled around the countryside, healing and teaching in the weeks and months beforehand. So much so that the people enthusiastically threw down cloaks and waved palm branches as signs of acceptance and support.³

But, as the week progressed, as the loud mouths and mob leaders increasingly expressed doubts and criticisms about the Galilean, people began to change their minds. Many began to wonder: Why is Jesus acting in such strange ways? Why enter the city on the back of a silly-looking donkey and not a regal black stallion? Why upset the money-changers' tables in the Temple and get all the Pharisees upset? Why confront the civil and religious powers and run the risk of being arrested? Why keep talking about sacrifice and death?

Surely, Jesus is crazy, they thought. He does not need to go to such extreme lengths to get his point across. Even his most ardent and loyal supporters seemed to be saying to themselves, "This man's way is absurd. It is utter foolishness. If he goes on as he is doing, if he doesn't adopt a more sane and rational approach, he'll get himself killed."

How many people, down through history, have been dismissed in similar fashion? Condemned for their seeming foolishness?

"Columbus is mad," said his critics at the Spanish royal court, when he talked about a great sea voyage to the west, "The world is flat. He'll fall over the edge."

And what about Isaac Newton? Just after he had published his Law of Gravitation, one of his critics was heard to remark, "This crazy mathematician will not have twenty followers in his lifetime and soon will be forgotten."

And then there was Abraham Lincoln. Just after he had made his famous Gettysburg Address, an editorial in the local newspaper next day stated, "We must pass over these silly remarks of our President. For the credit of our nation we are willing that the veil of oblivion be dropped over them and that they be no more thought of or repeated."⁴

Or, what about Barack Obama, for that matter? When he made it clear that health care reform was at the top of his agenda, many wondered at his

sanity. Why take on this sacred cow? Why invite the hateful opposition that surely would come by embracing this cause? Many prominent senators and congressional leaders, they remembered only too well, had tried and failed to bring change on this contentious issue. Obama must be crazy to think that he, a comparative newcomer to Washington, could make progress where others had fallen short and given up.

And yet, for all the seeming craziness of the likes of Obama and others before him, their critics and naysayers were ultimately proved wrong. What seemed to be foolishness in attempting unattainable change came to be deemed wisdom when it appeared that that change was indeed possible.

Likewise with Jesus. The way he took through Holy Week, the way of weakness, the way of non-violence, the way of suffering, the way of the Cross, in his attempt to change the world and its people, seemed so stupid at the time. But, later on, when people began to see that radical change was possible, when they began to experience the powerful spiritual forces for good and renewal his death and resurrection let loose in the world, his foolishness came to be viewed as Wisdom with a capital "W". As St. Paul said, "For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength."⁵

In today's world, the way of Jesus still appears to be the way of folly. So much of Christianity seems to be out of step with contemporary society: the healings, the miracles, the turning of the other cheek, the loving one's enemies, the belief in the atoning power of Christ's death and the hope of the Resurrection for life beyond this life. All this seem to be so irrational, so foolish – especially in an age so greatly dominated by the logic and reason of science and technology.

But, while we must always work to make Christianity more credible in today's world, removing wrong perceptions and false stereotypes, yet we can never transform our faith into a totally rational matter. We have to accept that there is a certain element of craziness that goes with following Jesus. We are called to believe those things and act in those ways that will always seem to be nonsense to the secular mind and out-of-sync with the ways of the world. We have to be willing to

be “fools for Christ’s sake”⁶, as St. Paul says, and there is no way around it. It is part and parcel of the genuine Christian experience.

And though such “foolishness” may cause us a lot of grief and frustration, yet it means as Christians we are given the potential to make a difference along life’s way.

A pastor tells about meeting a prominent business executive at a social occasion. Looking for a point of conversational contact, he said, “I believe that a member of my congregation works for your company.” “Oh, yes,” replied the CEO, “That’s James Hanson, isn’t it? He’s one of my vice-presidents. I don’t know if you have found this to be true in your church but Jim is kind of crazy. For every ten business ideas he brings to me, I’d say that only one ever pans out.” The pastor was a little perplexed, “Forgive me for asking, if Jim is so crazy, why would you make him a vice-president and give him such responsibility?” “Why?” said the CEO, “because, for all his seeming stupidity, Jim is the only person in the company who sees things in an original way and comes up with the kind of new ideas that make a difference.”⁷

Let’s face it, as Christians in the 21st century, we always risk being viewed as somewhat crazy. But that’s good. Being “fools for Christ’s sake” is an honour. And also an opportunity. It means that we are enabled to see things from a radically new perspective, from God’s perspective, from the perspective of his love, and so are better equipped to make a real difference in the world in which he has placed us today.

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¹ Real Names of Famous People,

http://www.wilson.fraser.btinternet.co.uk/real_names.htm

² *The Vicar of Dibley*, tv.com, <http://www.tv.com/the-vicar-of-dibley/community-spirit/episode/46827>

³ Matthew 21:1-11

⁴ The Harrisburg Pennsylvania Patriot and Union, cf. Jerry Stratton, “Embarrassed by our president”,

<http://www.hoboes.com/Mimsy/?ART=493>

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:25

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:10

⁷ William Willimon, “Fools for Christ”, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 35, No.2, 2007, p.5 (adapted)