

Postscript: *The sense in humour*

Small events sometimes have an unpredictable significance. One such occurred many winters ago during a walk with a fellow student along a very icy pathway. We were deep in some theological discussion when suddenly he just seemed to disappear! I looked behind me, and there he was lying in the snow, feet in the air. I stood over him, Augustine and Aquinas forgotten, and burst into laughter. Without any warning, my feet went from under me too, and there I was at his side, both of us with our feet in the air, both laughing helplessly.

I often remember that scene when theological discussions become intense: how much they would benefit from a dose of laughter. 'There is only one kind of theologian I find I can trust,' a well-known Irish theologian once boomed out in a crowded room of academics; 'a man with whom I can enjoy a laugh and a beer'. Ever since people first started slipping on banana skins, humour has always been an antidote to the danger of taking ourselves too seriously. We need to be able to stand back and see the absurdity of so many of our concerns. Surely we must give the angels and saints a lot of fun as they look down on our antics. 'He who sits in the heavens laughs', the second Psalm tells us. Maybe it would help if we joined in the fun.

Not that we should trivialise the serious side of living, and still less should we fail to tune in to the tragedies so many are experiencing — the wars, the poverty and hunger, the sickness and the dying all around us. For those with no faith to live by, the problems of our world are indeed daunting. But our faith is that Christ came to save us from the mess, and we Christians are given hope in the midst of the world's sorrows. When Christ appeared after the resurrection no one is suggesting that he came into the upper room rolling with laughter, but I find it hard to believe that he had not a smile on his face when he gave his disciples that glowing message of peace. The Risen Christ is truly with us. Surely we need to laugh and smile at ourselves a little more. He who laughs lasts, as the saying goes.

The same might be said about so much in the life of the Church. The prophets of gloom are marching in with their hammers and nails to board up the windows of the old institution; 'renewal is a dark and serious business', they tell us, 'we must stand united against the dangers of fresh air and freedom'. Is not the great danger that of forgetting that the Holy Spirit is in charge, and that when Christ spoke to us of unity he used the language of love, not of theological accuracy and fulminating authority? A bit more light-heartedness might solve a lot of ecclesiastical problems. As a friend used to say, it is hard to condemn a man as a heretic while you are drinking his whisky.

No wonder we are making heavy weather of the challenge of evangelisation in a world that is already serious enough without our ponderous interventions. How much we need the gift of a Chesterton to reveal the absurdity of so many of the games people play: the power games played by politicians, the war games played by the military, and the myriad games with money and shopping and sex and self-indulgence with which people pass their time between being born and dying — most games are vulnerable to the critique of healthy laughter.

In the days of the cold war I spent some time in Moscow, and my strongest memory is of the countless pictures and quotations of Lenin: 'Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live for ever'. On my last day I endured a long cold wait to view his tomb. There he was in the sacred casket — dead as a dodo. Standing in the gloom and silence, I felt a great gust of laughter rising up inside me. It had hardly become a smile before a soldier with a fixed bayonet was bearing down on me with anything but laughter in his eyes. I learned something that day about the weapons of oppression. Our society is afraid of a smile that comes from the heart. If we want to bring it to its senses, maybe our first task is to restore to it the sense in humour.

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