

Does God Have a Sense of Humour?

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, 11th March 2007.

(Numbers 22:21-34, John 9:13-34)

When I was a teenager, I had a friend who told me he could never be a Christian. When I asked him why he told me that it was because God was too serious, the Bible was too serious, and church is too serious.

When the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas wrote his play *Under Milk Wood* he described the night as being 'Bible-black'. And he wasn't only comparing the night to a black leather cover on a Bible. He was evoking a whole dark, gloomy atmosphere he associated with the Bible. But my friend and Dylan Thomas were simply saying what lots of people think: God and humour somehow don't really go together.

And the fact is: lots of the people who buy into this gloomy, humourless stereotype are churchgoers. I've spoken in churches where I've used some funny stories, that you'd think might at least make people smile. But the congregations all kept their faces grim and serious. Why? Because they believed faith wasn't a laughing matter, and church should be a solemn place. Laughter in church was somehow irreverent or inappropriate.

How many of us deep down think that the Bible may be the word of God, but it's the word of a God who doesn't like laughing much, who's got more important things to do than tell jokes? If that's your assumption, then let me tell you something. The Bible is more full of humour than you ever imagined it could be.

You might say, 'well, if that's true, why have I never been told about it? Why have I never spotted it?' I think there are various reasons why not. One obvious reason is that humour's often found in the way words are used, and something that might actually be hilarious in the Bible, we can't see because it doesn't come across in an English version. It's a bit like when they translate an English film into French. Sometimes the jokes in one language don't translate directly into the other language.

Another reason is that some Biblical humour might not be quite the same as modern TV-style humour. Another is that it's often subtle, and you've got to read carefully to get the joke,

Let me give you an example, in the Old Testament book of Judges there's a baddy called Sisera. He's been in battle and his Mum's sitting in her chariot wondering why he's not home yet. She says to herself: 'Oh, don't worry! He's obviously killing the enemy, and looting their property, and running off with their women!' But the reader knows that he's actually just been killed himself, his own army's been looted, and far from running off with foreign women, one of those foreign women has just killed him with a tent peg! OK, it's a slightly grim sort of humour, but humour in the Bible is often this kind of ironic reversal of expectations.

Another reason why people haven't found humour in the Bible is that they haven't been looking for it; they haven't expected to find it there. Some people feel that Christianity is by definition about being solemn and formal. So even when the Bible does have jokes which travel down the ages and through translations, they don't notice.

So what other kinds of humour are there in the Bible? One is funny characters. Lots of us were told stories about people like Samson and Jonah when we were young. But, as grown-ups, have we ever looked at the stories again?

Take Samson. He's like Asterix the Gaul after drinking his potion: he lifts up and carries off the gates of the city, kills a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey, and his love-life turns into a farce. He never learns from his mistakes, he keeps on bouncing back into the next disaster. The story's written as a comedy.

Or Jonah. The whole story's written to make fun of Jonah. It's a kind of practical joke played on Jonah by God. You've got the character of Jonah: he's sulky, moody, grumpy, and behaves like a spoilt toddler sucking his thumb for the whole story. He's like Eeyore in Winnie-the-Pooh. And at the very end when he finally preaches in Nineveh - not only do the people repent: all the animals do too - they all wear sack-cloth and ashes! And all Jonah can do is sit and sulk. The whole nation and their pets have just turned to God and he's still Mr Grumpy, the whole story's written as a satire. It's meant to be funny.

There's another example of deliberate comedy in the Bible, but it's one that we don't normally see because it means going into the translation of the Hebrew, and that's comedy of names. There's a baddy in the book of Judges called Eglon, and there are comic situations based on how fat he is. But there aren't just jokes about it: the name Eglon actually means, 'Fat Cow'. There's another baddy called Cushan Rishathaim, which means 'Mr Superbad Double-Villain'. The name of the king in the book of Esther means King Headache, and there are lots of other examples.

And the stories of Jesus actually use a lot of humour. But to see that, we need to get rid of those awful images of a Jesus who's moody and serious, and drifts around in a long nightie. One of the verbal pictures Jesus uses is of a man who carefully strains out a gnat from his cup of tea, and then goes and swallows a whole camel! Or the woman doing her sewing, who tries to thread a camel through the eye of her needle. If there's one thing we can know for certain about the historical Jesus, it's that he found camels funny.

And then there's our reading from John's Gospel. It's pure sit-com, using lots of irony and sarcasm. These terribly serious religious people, who are out to get Jesus, are trying to get to the bottom of what's happened, and they ask the healed man for the second time what's been going on. So this cheeky little bloke turns round and says: 'Oh! I know why you want me to say it all again, it's so that you can become his followers too!' Now of course that's the last thing they want to do, but it's deliberately funny because the idea of it's so ridiculous.

There's lots of humour in the Bible, and we could give lots more examples: the donkey who talks (from our first reading), Jacob jumping into bed with the person he thinks is his wife and in the morning discovering he's got the wrong girl, it's all a bit like a Carry-On film or a West End farce.

But all of this has implications for our understanding of God. I already know that God understands my sorrows and my difficulties. But this tells us that he understands my joys as well, the funny bits, and maybe actually enjoys our bad jokes too. It means that Jesus is fully human, somebody who uses humour. Not a drifty, serious figure who spoils the party: he's more likely to be the one in the corner telling the jokes.

It means that our church needs to be a place of joy, of humour and laughter. And maybe if our church really is that, people like my friend who said Christianity is all too serious will be forced to think again.