

[Jesus said, “You] should always pray and not give up. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

“We need more jokes, more humour in church; more lightness and a sense of joy.”

So came the report, from one of the Ministry Team, of a conversation she had had with someone at the end of our monthly United Communion Service.

“Well they've come to the wrong service then!” quipped another team member.”

There's some truth in both views, of course.

It's hard to think of anyone who doesn't enjoy a good joke. And humour has an extraordinary power to abruptly shift the ‘emotional register’ of both individuals, and whole groups. A shift into a positive and enjoyable emotional state: a state of more openness, receptivity and bonding. Humour as such is a great gift.

Yet, as social defenses may weaken, humour can have a *risky* edge. I'm thinking of the sort of humour that plays - dangerously - with our unconscious prejudices, and which is performed, in truth, at the expense of others. And also, there's the deliciously, ‘*naughty*’ humour that creeps to the edge of what's unseemly, indeed, at times, taboo.

So perhaps, not surprisingly, when it comes to religion, we draw back from the risk of straying into the ‘wrong’ sort of ‘offensive-to-some’ humour.

Moreover, and especially in the context of Holy Communion, we do have an innate sense that humour simply doesn't mix well with what is most profound in the truth and depth of being human. When the curtain of our habitual shallowness is drawn back, as we seek an encounter with God. For, if we but listen and watch, in the drama of the words and actions of the Holy Communion service, we are first exposed to the truth of a dangerous and brutal and suffering world ... and of our selfishness and self-deceit and betrayal ... and death. Before then, we are released into the *joy* of our

salvation, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ: feeding on his body and blood to 'en-joy' a life risen, in and through his Spirit.

So no 'jokes' there.

Rightly, we can expect a 'seriousness' in our religion. And a seriousness that gets beneath merely a show of *acting* seriously, to take us deeper, to often uncomfortable and challenging places. The *ritual* of Holy Communion is designed to do this, and then to open us to the insight of a *true* joy.

But as Jesus himself knew, there's a difficulty in managing to achieve the shift from the 'everyday' to the *sacred*. So what does Jesus do? Well, although we've been *trained* (almost) *not* to expect it, Jesus often uses humour to prise us into those emotional spaces where we become more receptive to the harder questions.

Today's Gospel reading is actually a great example of that technique.

And this parable, on the theme of God's generous response to persistence in prayer is, indeed, the echo of an earlier parable, likewise filled with humour.

We heard, a couple of Sundays ago, just after Jesus had taught his disciples the 'Lord's Prayer', the story of a man who, very late one night, found himself with unexpected visitors, but with nothing to feed them. So in desperation he called round at a friend's house asking if he could borrow three loaves of bread. And the 'so called' friend opened the top window and shouted out, "What time do you call this? Everything's locked up. Go away!"

I'm sure that we sat, with furrowed brows, taking it *all* very seriously. But, just imagine how Jesus' first audience, of ordinary, village folk. would have heard it. They would have laughed; "Oh yeah, I know somebody just like that. Mean as hell!"

And similarly, this morning's parable, of 'the Persistent Widow in the face of the Unjust Judge', is like a little *comic* sketch. One that turns upside down how we would expect a Judge to act: really poking fun at the sort of everyday bureaucratic nonsense that there was then ... and probably always will be.

Luke frequently uses the image of the 'widow' - someone in that society where *all* power was invested in men - as representing powerlessness.

Yet we can all recognise that person - with no leverage other than that they've got the 'bit between their teeth' - and applaud them, while laughing at the lazy,

but now harassed, official. It's the sort of knowingly, seditious humour that comes out of living in corrupt and cruel authoritarian regimes. And Jesus' audience, living under the brutality of Roman occupation, would have lapped it up and loved it!

Nevertheless, the whole parable, shifting Jesus' audience into that different emotional register of humour, is set between two very serious, implied questions.

At the outset we heard, "You should always pray and not give up."

"But *really*", we might well ask, "*Does* persistent prayer *actually* work?"

And at the end Jesus says, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

"What *is* the real state of the faith you so causally profess?"

In effect, Jesus is challenging them: "Do you really believe that God himself - the God of bountiful goodness and love - cares *that* much about *you*?"

And, unexpectedly, the crowd are thrown back into a profound religious question ... which now has all the more chance of hitting home.

And hopefully, for us this morning, we too are 'brought up short': "*Really* how seriously do we take prayer?"

"Does prayer, like lobbying God, work to get him to do what we would like?"

And, if it appears *not* to work, well, is it because you're just not being *persistent* enough? Or, is it because you don't have enough faith?"

These are excellent questions. *Real* questions, propelling us out of a religion of lip service into uncomfortable places where questions like this really matter, and challenge us at *our* roots too.

You will have your own answers to these questions.

For me, perhaps by temperament or through training, I must admit to harbouring a streak of skepticism that pressing God with my own wishlist of preferred solutions for the world, and for your, and for my problems, alone cuts the mustard.

On the other hand, I *can* witness, in my sinfulness, to the real need to bring my mind and heart before the God of Jesus. And that then, through the Spirit of Christ, - that engine of prayer - I find myself *both* to be reassured of Jesus' indwelling love for me; *and* to be reconnected with something about the seriousness and responsibilities of being *fully* human in Christ, which, *obviously*, includes prayer for others and for the world.

And I so discover too, that even if my prayer does *not* change the world to my liking, then certainly, in prayer, *I am changed* by God in Christ.

“[You] should always pray and not give up ... However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”