

St Nicholas Parish Church

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021

A question that has perturbed me over many years, “Why do some Church members look as if they have just had unanaesthetised root canal treatment?” You see, for many folk outwith the Kirk, that is the face of religion. It’s the kind of religion you are told is good for you, like jogging. Have you ever seen a happy jogger? The first time I see one, I will take it up...honestly!

Have you seen members of the Kirk who look like joggers, sweating hard and trying so hard to do the right thing, they forget to be human in the process. Some of them are so heavenly minded, they are of no earthly use, and they get so uptight about things that are of little importance. It’s the “The Revd I.M.Jolly” brand of the faith!

Friends, our religion should be enjoyable. It should give us wings and lift us up, and should not drag us down like a heavy weight.

Remember our Lord Himself said, “My yoke is easy; my burden is light.”? He also said, “I have come that you may have life in all its fullness.....I have come that my joy should be in you, and that your joy should be complete.”

It was our local Bard himself who said that “some folk have just enough religion to make them miserable.”.

There are many Christians whose take on the Christian faith is wallowing in guilt, the folk who are convinced that if it’s fun then it must be indecent, immoral or fattening. All they have read in the Scriptures is the phrase that begins, “Thou shalt not....”

These phrases are in the pages of the Bible all right, and for good reason. There are things that we do that make nobody happy, like lying and killing and cheating and ripping people off. Those things are prohibited in every major religion in the world, and in almost

every legal system. The laws in the UK are based on them. Without them, we would have social anarchy.

But you can be a completely wonderful person and never do anything wrong and still be as uptight as a Wee Free at the Munich Beer Festival!

Doing everything right is not the same as being happy.

Nowhere in the pages of the Bible have I ever found a commandment that says, “Don’t have fun!”. There is nothing that states that you need walk around looking sanctimonious or that you must not enjoy a good party or laugh at a good joke at Church.

Our Lord was not a stand-up comedian, but He did have a very lively, rollicking sense of humour. We know that He loved a party and that He knew how to have fun. In fact, some of his contemporaries got on His case because He had a reputation for hanging around with the “wrong” people. Jesus enjoyed His friends, and He had a lot of them – women of doubtful repute and winos amongst them. He told jokes, He loved the company of children and He wasn’t above pulling someone’s leg a little.

Actually, when all is said and done, Jesus was far more concerned about what people were like, than what they believed. His Gospel of God’s redeeming grace and love was not all about finding fault with people or pointing the finger at their lifestyle; it was a Gospel that made people feel loved and accepted and so they wanted to be more and more like Him. Here was a Saviour who showed you a “better way”, a way that you were keen to follow. Those early disciples, before they became known as Christians, were known as “the people of the way.”.

Over the years I have had to face criticism from some quarters for telling jokes in my preaching. There are Church members who feel that this is totally inappropriate when one is expounding the Word of God. Sermons are not the place for laughter.

Well, you and I are the only beings on the face of the earth that can laugh. Okay, angels and God can laugh. Humans and angels are the only ones in God's creation endowed with a developed sense of humour. Animals can do almost all the things that we can do, and they can even play at a very basic sort of level, but they can't get the point of a joke. Animals can express delight, but they can't enjoy a good belly laugh.

That sense of the comic has, I believe, plenty to do with being created in the "image and likeness of God". It has very little to do with coming up with clever one liners, or making other people laugh.

One of the greatest theologians of all time, Charlie Chaplin, understood that. Theologian, comedian – same thing. Comedy is just applied theology.

In his films, Chaplin shows us the close relationship between humour and virtues such as faith and hope and love on the one hand, and between humourlessness and pride, greed and envy on the other hand. He taught us to laugh at ourselves – how to love our silly, bumbling, self-important selves.

All of Charlie Chaplin's films use the same basic theme that we find in the pages of the Bible. All of Chaplin's films are about a funny little guy who keeps falling on his face and who does everything wrong but seems to come out on top in the end.

That is the essential story of our supreme faith – of losers who did everything wrong and got the whole thing messed up and the God who loves us anyway.

As a boy growing up in Johnstone, I had the privilege of having as my Minister a very saintly man of God, a great evangelical preacher, whose face shone with the love of Jesus. And how he made us laugh as he preached! And when we laughed, we remembered the whole point of his stories. I will never forget when he said one day, "I watch the folk coming up to the drive to the Church on Sunday mornings, and they all look as if they are going to the dentist, and when the

service is over, and I greet them as they leave, sometimes they look as if that is where they have been!”.

A God up there in the clouds zapping sinners with thunderbolts doesn't do anything for me, but a God who is down here beside us, weeping and worrying and sometimes breaking out in great peals of unrestrained laughter – that kind of God I can love and want to serve.

So, if you come out of Church looking as if you have been sucking a lemon, then think again of why you went in in the first place!

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