

He Who Laughs Last ...

In the name of him whose compassions never fail, dear friends in Christ: It has been said that laughter is the best medicine. And while that's a gross overstatement – I mean, if someone is really sick then aspirin or antibiotics or another medicine is probably more appropriate – there is at least some truth to it. Laughter doesn't make sick people healthier; but it can make them feel better while they are sick. And certainly in what I do, I've found that at times a bit of humor in otherwise sad or difficult situations can help take at least some of the sting away—at least, temporarily. It's a bit tricky though, because it can backfire on you. Sometimes people who are really hurting are in no mood for humor and they'll take it the wrong way. Fortunately, my job is not to go around telling jokes to people to make them laugh; rather it's to bring them the sure and certain comfort of God's word and his promises to us in Christ Jesus. And when people are open to hearing them, they are able to find in God's promises real relief and hope even in the most desperate situations.

Just the same, everyone enjoys a good laugh. And that's a good thing: laughter is a God-given expression of overflowing joy and exuberance. We were designed to laugh. And yet, it occurred to me as I studied this week's readings, that most of what we laugh at is usually result of the fall into sin. I expect that most of us had to learn once upon a time (probably while taking a class in English or literature) that, by definition, a tragedy portrays man as better than he is, and a comedy portrays man as worse than he is. So what makes a comedy funny and something to laugh at is the exaggeration of human faults and shortcomings – which are, of course, a direct result of the fall.

For example, maybe you've heard the one about the blonde girl who went to the stylist to have her hair done. When she sat down in the chair, the hairdresser said, "We'll just remove this for the time being", and she started to take off the headset of earphones the blonde girl was wearing. The blonde responded immediately, knocking the other woman's hands away, and frantically holding the headset in place. "No," she said; "it has to stay on. Without it *I'll die*." The hairdresser said, "Don't be silly. You won't die just because you can't listen to your music for a few minutes. Besides, how can I do your hair with it on? It'll be in the way." But no amount of persuasion could get the blonde girl to change her mind. She insisted that it would mean her death if the headset were removed. Finally, the stylist agreed to try to do her hair with it on. But it wasn't easy, and the stylist was having a frustrating time of it. But then, after a while, she noticed that the blonde girl was drifting off to sleep. She thought, "She'll never know the difference" and slipped the headset off so she could finish the job properly. Well, as she's working away, sure enough, a few minutes later the blonde girl just flops over on the floor, dead as a doornail. The stylist is astonished. "How could that happen?" she thought. Only when she held the headset to her ear did she understand. A recorded voice was saying, "Breathe in (*inhale*) ... breathe out (*exhale*). Breathe in (*inhale*) ... breathe out (*exhale*)."

You see what I mean? If the story made you laugh, it's because of the way it exaggerates the widely held notion that people of a certain pale hair color are intellectually challenged. But strictly speaking, there's nothing funny about stupidity, and you certainly wouldn't laugh if you heard that someone died at the hairdresser. It's only worth a chuckle because you know that no one is so stupid that they would forget to breathe. On the other hand, if the story didn't make you laugh, it's probably either because you'd already heard it and knew the punch line or because you're blonde and didn't understand it. And if that's the case, I'll pause here for a moment to let someone sitting close to you explain it. ... I want you to know too that the reason I don't feel bad about telling blonde jokes is that before I went *very prematurely* gray, I too was blonde.

But in any case, and all joking aside, my point is that a lot of what we laugh at amplifies human faults. And part of the humor of it is that we know that it's amplified. It isn't true. The same applies to slapstick comedy: we can laugh at the misfortunes or foolishness of people presenting that kind of humor only because we know that no one is really that foolish and no one is really being hurt in the various stunts. I mean, it wouldn't be a laughing matter to make fun of someone who really was intellectually challenged. It wouldn't be right to laugh at someone who was really being hurt. Now, don't get me wrong. Sometimes we can and do laugh at such things; but when we do, we've crossed a line. The humor has become mean spirited, ugly, and

cruel. Such is the case with a lot of the derogatory racial humor we sometimes hear. It's actually motivated by a desire to put certain groups of people down so that others can feel superior about themselves. There's nothing good about that kind of laughter.

And that brings me to yet another kind of laughter, the kind we see in this morning's Gospel lesson. It is a laughter of derision and contempt. It is an expression of naked unbelief. And I want to be careful here, because I can't say that this kind of laughter is necessarily bad because, according to the Scriptures, even God engages in it at times. In the Second Psalm we read that the Lord looks down from heaven at mankind's pathetic attempts to rid himself of God's seemingly oppressive rule and place himself in charge of the universe. It says the Lord watches people do this and he laughs at them. He scoffs at how we exaggerate ourselves, our power, our intellect, and our importance, and how we imagine that somehow, we are his equal. And when he laughs it's like he's taunting us sarcastically and saying, "Ooh, you've got me worried now!" Even God has a sense of humor about human pretensions. And when we are in similar situations, this kind of laughter is not altogether inappropriate. I mean, who can keep a straight face when that creepy looking leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-il, acts like he can take on the world with one hand tied behind his back. He's preposterous. I mean, sure, the US used to have an actor who played in B grade westerns as president; but it seems that North Korea is ruled by a guy who embodies all Three Stooges. You can't help but laugh at him. And so like I said, there's nothing inherently wrong with that sort of laughter. The problem comes when people turn it around and use it to laugh at the Lord.

That's what we've got in today's story. In last week's Gospel reading, we heard how Jesus and his disciples set sail in a boat from the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee to cross back over to the city of Capernaum, which was sort of Jesus' base of operations during the early part of his ministry. It was while making this night crossing that there arose a violent storm on the lake that threw the disciples into a panic. They were certain that they were about to die. In their terror they woke Jesus who was sleeping peacefully in the stern sheets. They asked him, "Don't you care if we all die?" In response Jesus just kind of yawns and stretches, rubs his eyes, and says rather nonchalantly, "Peace, be still." And the storm stops. The wind dies down to a calm. The waves diminish to ripples. He says to his disciples, "What were you so worried about? Do you still not believe?" For their part, the disciples, who have seen Jesus perform *many* miracles by this time, are utterly astonished that his voice commands even the wind and sea. They gain a whole new appreciation for who it is exactly they are dealing with.

Sailing through the night, they arrive the next morning in Capernaum to discover a different kind of storm brewing. This one can't be seen or felt in the same way as the one on the lake; but in the hearts of two parents, Jairus and his wife, this is a tempest that rages with an intensity far worse than the one the disciples faced. Throughout the night their twelve-year old daughter, their only child, has been weakly gasping out her last breaths. The agonized parents have been praying, pleading, hoping against hope that God might spare their child; but so far, the situation has only grown darker. There isn't much time left. If only Jesus were here. They had seen him heal a number of people while he was in the city. In fact, Jairus was a leader in the synagogue where Jesus had freed a man from demon possession. But Jesus had left town several days ago to extend his ministry elsewhere. It was after he left that their daughter fell ill. No one knew when he might be back. So the two parents keep their prayerful vigil at her bedside while a wider circle of family and friends remain just outside, close at hand. And every moment the storm inside them grows more desperate.

Suddenly they receive word – a glimmer of hope in the darkness of their despair. Jesus is back. His boat has just rowed into the harbor. So Jairus, leaving his wife and dying child, runs to the waterfront; but when he arrives he finds that a large crowd has already gathered around Jesus. It seems that everyone is competing for his attention. But this is no time to stand on ceremony. It's an emergency. Dispensing with the dignity befitting his office, Jairus, through a lot of shoving and prying, manages to work his way to the man at center of the teeming throng. Fearing that it may be too late already, he falls down before Jesus and begs, "Please, you must come at once. My little daughter is dying."

Jesus readily agrees to come; but it's awfully slow going. The crowd continues to press him with other concerns, and there are a number of delays on the way. All the while the storm of worry within Jairus continues to rise. But then, delivered by a messenger from the house, comes the blow that leaves him speechless; a blow to the heart of purest pain. Too late. She's gone. Why bother Jesus any more? Waves of

agony begin to sweep over him. They threaten to wash him away completely and drown him in sorrow. Just when he's about to be submerged in grief, Jesus speaks four words to him: "Don't fear; just believe." And at that moment there takes place within Jairus a miracle every bit as great as the calming of the storm on the sea. Even though outward conditions haven't changed one bit, Jairus believes and trusts in Jesus' words. The words of Jesus calm the storm of fear within him.

This is made clear because when they arrive at the house a full-fledged hurricane of grief underway. The text says that the people were literally howling and wailing like the wind in a storm. But Jairus is unmoved by it. He's with Jesus in this storm, and so he has no fear. Rather than get pulled into the vortex of this unbridled display of emotional distress, Jairus stands steadfast. He wades right through it with Jesus – just like Peter walking on the water. And now, in the same way that he asked his disciples what they were so worried about in the storm, Jesus asks these hyperventilating mourners, "What's all this commotion about?" Then he delivers the startling good news: "The child is not dead. She's only fallen asleep."

Now, these people know for certain that the child has died. And you might think that under the circumstances, since they don't believe Jesus, they would be angry with him for making light of the situation and filling the parents' heads with false hopes. Instead, we read that they *laughed* at Jesus. Some translations better capture the idea by saying "They laughed him to scorn". It's that bitter, mocking sort of laughter that they heap on Jesus. But what I want you to notice is how easily they shift from all this tearful wailing to scornful laughter. It seems so out of place – that is until you realize that both are expressions of the same thing: both their wailing and their laughing are expressions of unbelief at the words and promises of God.

And please don't misunderstand me: it's entirely appropriate to weep and shed tears when confronted by a sorrow such as the death of a loved one – especially the death of a child. Even Jesus wept at the grave of his friend, Lazarus. But there's a difference. The kind of carrying on described in the story is a pathetic, hopeless howling that imagines that *all* is lost, "it's the worst tragedy ever", and "Oh, how could a loving God allow such a thing to happen?" It's the piteous lamentation of those who do not believe, who have no trust that the Lord works his good will even in tragic circumstances, and who have no hope that one day God will raise the dead and that all will be restored even better than before. A believer experiences sorrow, sure; but he does so with the certain knowledge that Jesus is standing beside him in the storm, that Jesus is with him in the loss, and that Jesus will set things right, if not sooner in this life then certainly in the next. St. Paul said it this way: "We don't grieve like the rest of men who have no hope ... we know that [when Jesus comes again] he will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in him." And so, as we said with the Psalmist, even though we sow in tears, we do so knowing that there will be a harvest of joy – that the bodies we sadly lay in the grave will one day spring forth to everlasting life and eternal laughter.

But for the time being, the unbelieving world alternately wails hopelessly at its losses and laughs at the words and promises of Jesus. That's what these mourners around Jairus' house are doing. And in this way they are not unlike the thief on the cross who complained bitterly about his terrible, dying situation and at the same time sneered and laughed at Jesus. And that, I think, is the essence of the point I'm trying to make this morning. None of us would ever think to laugh at Jesus or to mock him; and yet, when we find ourselves doubting his word or giving in to despair in times of sorrow or loss, that is exactly what we are doing. We are looking at him from our own cross of suffering, the one appointed to us by God, and we're joining in saying, "You who saved others, why aren't you saving yourself and – more importantly – me?" But the truth lies hidden to our eyes. The fact is that by not sparing himself, he did save you. His blood was shed for your life. And the truth is that by not sparing you your present pain, whatever it is, he means to open your heart to work in you by his Word the very faith in him through which you too will be saved.

And so for the times we've given in to this kind of faithlessness and have effectively laughed at and mocked our Lord, we ask his forgiveness. And doing so, we ask him to speak to us his words that will give us the same faith and trust he worked in the heart of Jairus when he said, "Don't fear; just believe." He does this, of course, when he says to us, "Believe that your baptism united you to me forever. Believe that my death for your sin is your own death. Believe that this is my body and blood given for you. Believe that you have been forgiven for my sake. Believe that my life – my resurrection – is your own. Believe that because I live, you too

will live forever; and I will raise you up on the last day. Believe that I am with you always, and that nothing can ever take you out of my hands. Believe that nothing can ever separate you from my love.”

By such words and promises, Jesus continues to speak faith into our hearts by the power and work of his Holy Spirit. This is the faith by which we live. This is the faith that gives us the courage and strength to endure our losses, to sail calmly through life’s storms, precisely because we know that weeping lasts only a night and that in the end, at the dawn of the endless day, he will call us to arise from the sleep of death – just like he did for the daughter of Jairus. And then, as it was for her parents, our sorrows will be turned to joy.

Meanwhile, however, the mocking laughter of the world goes on. And they laugh at us too for believing Christ’s promises. Such laughter will be turned to weeping – to endless remorse and sorrow. But for us in whom Christ has worked the miracle of saving faith, the tears we shed now will give way to laughter that will last forever. And that will give a whole new meaning to the phrase, “He who laughs last, laughs best”. May God grant it to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!