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PROTESTANT AND HUMOROUS

Faith and Humour are not Opposites, but Complement One Another by Gisela Matthiae

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“ARE YOU HUMOUROUS WHEN YOU ARE ALONE?”

asks Max Frisch in his questionnaire on humour. This question is, at first, somewhat irritating, since humour is frequently connected with socialising and with the ability to make others laugh. However, in a pointed manner, this enquiry gets to the heart of the matter of humour, since, in an adverse situation, humour boils down to a sense or an attitude. It is only in such a situation that a sense of humour can unleash its striking power and potential for change, which is brought about by making oneself laugh when one could just as well cry or fly off the handle with anger. Take for example, the man who went for a walk on a Sunday in a snow-white shirt on which a pigeon chose to deposit its droppings. “Truly,” he said, “it is good that cows can't fly!” With a clever comparison, he claims the power of interpretation over his misery, and quite rightly so. There are always more perspectives concerning the one problem to consider, no matter how unpleasant it may be.

GRIEF AND HAPPINESS OF HUMOUR AND FAITH

Whether the issue is a mere trifle or an enormous mess, “Humour grows on the muck which pollutes the air that I breathe” (Sigmund Graff). Thus, humour has amazing potential. It connects the greatest misery with the greatest lightness, without casually brushing the hardship aside. On the contrary, only in confrontation can new perspectives become accessible. The Christian faith is very much aware of this in its talk about sin and redemption. Sin, which is much more than personal failure, describes our overall situation. Nobody manages to act justly in a world full of injustice and violence. We attempt to do so and yet, unwittingly and unintentionally, contribute to the situation. It is difficult to recognise the mechanisms of one's involvement in such situations in a neoliberal economic system, which suggests that every hardship can be attributed to poor personal performance. In the same vein, redemption is also much more than a personal experience. It is the mad assumption that the unconditional love and care of God is already at work, and that we already live in God's just world, even if it does not look like it. Stumbling, searching, sensing, spirited, lion-hearted or faint-hearted, we do our best, enjoy wonderful moments, get upset and look for strategies to change whatever has annoyed us. This is somewhat mad, and is meant to be, since we are nonetheless “fools in Christ” (1 Cor 4:10).

SERIOUS, BUT NOT TOO SERIOUS

Faith thus confronts the serious side of life - and humour does the same. Humour is the amazing attitude of taking oneself, one's circumstances, the world and all the disagreeable things seriously, but not too seriously. In this way, there is creative room for manoeuvre between being serious and being all-too-serious, which opens up new opportunities for action. This constitutes the lightness and inner freedom of humour. It is also the attitude with which faith is familiar. An inner freedom amidst all the mess, even towards death. The Christian faith is not afraid to take even death seriously, but not too seriously. The lightness and the joy of life, which should be contagious, are meant to make one take oneself seriously, but not too seriously. In general, this little word “too” seems to be quite

complicated, and one which increasingly manoeuvres a person into a nonsensical high-performance spiral. Everything needs to be perfect, absolutely watertight, unambiguous, well thought out and exact. Such an attitude generates self-opinionated, dogmatic and - in the worst case - fundamentalist individuals. It is good if humour can enter at such a point, since it saves faith from fanaticism and brings it back to itself. Both, faith and humour, know full well that we are not perfect, and that we were not made to be perfect. Imperfection - and even failure - are part of life. It is good Reformation doctrine to remember God's grace at this point. Whilst Luther asked how he could find a gracious God; today, every person has to ask himself: When will I finally be gracious with myself and accept myself, warts and all? When will I stop functioning according to this rationale of further, better, more? One wishes for a bit more defiance, the defiance of humour and of faith.

Fun-loving and exuberant, a person with humour relies upon their own creativity in a time of need, just as faith relies on the power which which comes to its full strength in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Therefore, both humour and faith hope for what is impossible, even though they do not hope for what is perfect; and faith even hopes for God's impossible possibilities. Indeed, they allow us to be courageous, at times also visionary, audacious, nonconformist, careless and even boisterous. This is the only way that things will change and, of course, one does not immediately have to start another Reformation. A sense of humour can prove to be very helpful in terms of developing faith, since it radiates this intrepidity, curiosity and defiance, which faith, at some point, seems to have lost. The band of disciples showed sparkling, ecstatic enthusiasm, shared possessions and words, and rejoiced, whilst sharing bread and wine (Acts 2), but this seems to have happened a long time ago. Could it be dangerous to be all aflutter with excitement, in an uncontrolled way? This is however, precisely what rejoicing is about, in the large and the small celebrations of life.