

Jesus College Oxford
Talking Funny for Four Thousand Years
OT: Exodus 4:10-16
Psalm 19
NT: Matthew 6:28-7:8

In the beginning was the word, and the word was two words. And the two words were knock knock...
(who's there?)

God

(God who?)

Well there's a question. If I could answer that, I wouldn't be a comedian, I'd be a minister with a solid gold sermon.

I've always thought there's a crossover between comedian, preacher and teacher. We're all one person, standing at the front of a room, everyone else facing the other way, trying to get a message across, dreading hecklers and walkouts.

Humour seems so current, so topical, so immediate, that we forget that it's been there since there've been people on this planet. Before Live at the Apollo, before the dodgy sensibilities of The Comedians show of the 70s, before Chaplin, Grimaldi the clown, before Shakespeare comedies, before even Barry Cryer was born, we've been puzzling out the world with laughter. It's a God-given gift.

Some of us do it from up here, up front, on a stage. Others do it from behind a desk, or at a pub table, or a dining-table, or on the phone to loved ones. Humour creates links between things – that thing looks a bit like that thing. X funny squiggle a bit like the equals sign, Y.

- Blackadder in the trenches looks like the old boy public school network.
- Michael McIntyre re-enacting putting condiments in a cupboard – looks like us when we do it. "I do that," we say.
- Delboy falls through a hole that looks like a bar. Dawn French falls into a hole that looks like a puddle. Miranda Hart falls into a hole that looks like a grave.

When we fall into holes in life, we want to know others have been there too.

I've got 2 jobs – stand-up comic, and comedy writer. I like both – as a writer for TV, you speak to more people, if BBC1 millions, if ITV2, dozens. But I'll always do stand-up, because even it's 100s, or dozens, comedy is meant to be communal. It's strangers gathering together and going "Oh yep, I've been there."

Humour helps us make sense of the world. It always has. We might not find it funny now – doesn't matter. Is there comedy in the Bible? Yes! Do we laugh at it? Not much! But then it's a two thousand year old book – some bits three thousand years. We don't laugh at a Shakespeare comedy and that's only 500 years old. There are early radio shows, 100 or 50 or 30 years old that we hear now, and think "Very unsophisticated humour." Tastes change, very quickly. And to laugh at something, we normally need to hear it, once. A second time, a third time, unless it's Delboy falling through the bar, often doesn't reward with a laugh.

But yes, Jesus – namesake of this college – spoke with humour. In that Venn diagram – of comedian, preacher, teacher – alright, he's more the latter two. But as a great public speaker, delivering the Sermon of all time, on that Mount, don't tell me he couldn't hold a crowd. He came from an earthy humble birth into an earthy humble profession – a carpenter, a tradesman – known through the centuries for their earthy speech. Jesus even uses carpentry language in the Sermon on the Mount. We heard it there – Matthew 7:3:

³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

He spoke of what he knew, of what those who were listening, knew. Using exaggeration, ridiculous image, allegory, Jesus told a joke. That isn’t to ridicule what he’s saying. He’s using humour to prove a point. If they’re laughing, they’re listening.

What about those of us not as gifted as Jesus, the great public speaker. Those of us without a Mount. Well that’s where Moses comes in – well, alright, he had a mount too. Before they invented staging, if you wanted to do any public speaking, you needed a mount. It’s why there are no ancient Dutch prophets: flat land, no mounts. For Moses, we go back a thousand years even earlier. Humour was even more different then. But so what if they’re laughing and listening... when you’re not even equipped with that public speaking gene. That was Moses.

“Please! Send someone else,” he said. “I’m slow of speech and tongue.” I’m not a natural public speaker, to be honest. I’ve done countless gigs when I get to the comedy club, and the bouncer says, “You don’t look like a comedian.” I don’t know if they’re expecting a fez and clown shoes, or what.

I’m not life and soul of the party, to be honest. At school, I wasn’t class clown. I was the quiet guy in the corner, lobbing things in then ducking out of the way before anyone noticed where it came from. Moses had Aaron, his brother who was the public speaker of the family. I’ve got my brother, Mark – he’s gifted at impersonations. He’s really good. I’m useless. Mark works for Sony. What a waste! He can impersonate his boss, but why have I got the public speaking job, doing comedy shows and things, unable to impersonate anyone.

I’ll demonstrate. My brother is so good at voices. Look, here’s my impression of my brother doing an impression. You’ll love it. It’s really good. There that was it. I sounded just the same as me, didn’t I? I’m rubbish.

I’m a Christian. In Comedy. But I’m a reluctant evangelist. I’ve ended up doing Pause for Thoughts on Radio 2, not because I set out to do it. I think God’s led me there – I keep thinking there’s a mistake though. It’s vicars, rabbis, imams, not comedians. But they had a Comic Relief week a few years back with comedians of a faith doing the Pause For Thoughts – turns out it was an audition. I just keep going back till they revoke my pass. Any week now...

Those passages, in Exodus, and that Psalm – the favourite of writer C.S. Lewis, who I believe has an Oxford connection or two – those passages speak to those who don’t think they’re the speakers. Moses thought he couldn’t speak. God filled that gap. The psalm focuses on shining light – as words – into all corners of the Earth.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
²Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
³They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
⁴Yet their voice^[b] goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Whether we write in words, proclaim in speech, publically, privately... our words have weight. We might think we have nothing to add. We might think public speaking isn’t for us. Fine. How about

private speaking. How about you and friends setting the world to rights over dinner? How about a couple deciding the future of their children? How about a father and son working out how to speak to each other?

We need that will and effort to build up, not knock down. Strengthen others, not weaken. Create not destroy. Laugh and dance and delight, not... whatever the opposite of laughter is. And it's not crying. Laughter can dry the tears, but it doesn't demean or belittle them.

Life's full of speedbumps and roadblocks for us to negotiate. People ask me if Donald Trump is good for comedy. No, he's good for tragedy. In terms of comedy, what is there to satirise? He's done it himself. And when news is fake news, what do you do with satire then? But even those peddlars of tragedy are brief, fleeting players on life's stage. If the supporting cast are comedians, then you've got a show.

Comedy and humour and laughter pick up the pieces, and make something new with it. Jokes might seem flippant, but a world without laughter is not this world.

So yes, I think Jesus, speaking from his Mount, uses humour to exaggerate, to embarrass the lofty, the rich young fool, the powers that be. Jesus embarrassing the by-the-book Pharisees, isn't far removed from Monty Python's attitude to authority figures in the 1970s. And that included the church – who as they saw it, was a high and lofty institution, that took itself too seriously. I wonder if the church is almost too easy a target today – the church doesn't run things, it's not up there with Parliament in terms of needing to be brought down a peg or two – and the truth is, the church does amazing amounts of good. Our Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Pope, both speak for the poor and humble themselves in a way that would embarrass Monty Python more than the other way around. The street-level service of the Salvation Army and the activism of Christian charities lead the way the world over in terms of tackling injustice and poverty. They're not the only ones doing it, but they see those roadblocks in the world and do something about it.

I've drifted a bit from comedy there. But in even the darkest of places, gallows humour, the laughter lifting nurses, police officers, fire fighters, morticians, undertakers... we conquer death by laughing at it – and the good news for Christians is we don't just laugh at it. We beat it. Simply because God has been there, where we are. Like that sitcom episode where the cast go out of their comfort zone, to an exotic new location... On tonight's unbelievable special, God comes to Earth. In Christ, God is saying, "I've been there. I've done that." People ask me if life is a tragedy or a comedy. Not daily, but they do ask. Life is a comedy, because when tragedy appears – and it does appear – God can say, "I've been there. I've done that." Even death on a cross, God has been there. Alright, there's no comedy there. But in the truest sense of comedy – a happy ending – there's the uplifting epilogue, after the cross, the cave. The surprise resurrection. Hope beating death. Triumph. Not death-ridden tragedy, but death-defying comedy.

Comedy can be a mirror – showing ourselves in our favourite sitcom characters: like us, enduring scrapes of their own making, via pratfalls, double-takes or scenes of apparently inescapable chaos, stemming from their character flaws – and ours.

Before sitcoms, there were similar tales. 3000 years ago, Aesop's fables used "humble incidents to teach great truths": from a golden-egg-laying goose warning against greed, to a hare and tortoise teaching that slow and steady wins the race.

And 2000 years ago, Jesus' parables were mini-sitcoms of their own: that Blackadderish Rich Fool storing crops to eat, drink and be merry, but not planting anything new... a Delboy-like Foolish Builder constructing a house on sand, with disastrous consequences... The Good Samaritan, one of the only normal, helpful people in a self-centred world...

Whether sitcom, parable or fable, these allegorical stories satisfy us: the humble raised up, the proud brought down from their most faulty of towers, a fool's cunning plan can save the day. We may pratfall from grace, but we always get up again, even just to glance at the imaginary camera, with a look that says, "I'm not alone in this, surely?"

It's quite an academic take on 'comedy'. But then, we're in Oxford, what do you expect. I'll water it down when I go to Cambridge.

But since you're Oxford... There's a writer who writes about writing: Christopher Vogler. He suggests that many great stories follow a pattern: A Hero's Journey. See if this sounds familiar. According to Chris Vogler's story theory, an ordinary world spawns a call to adventure: Harry Potter's letters by owl-mail; Luke Skywalker hearing Princess Leia's cry for help. The hero's unsure, but meets a Dumbledorian, Gandalfy, Obi-Wannish mentor, tries initial tasks, makes allies, trusts and distrusts, their own personal Hunger Games. They face their greatest foe in a supreme ordeal – a light-sabre-off with Darth Vader, or glimpsing the wizard behind the curtain. Finally the road home, to Kansas, Hobbiton, or back through the wardrobe. Our hero is changed, rewarded, with a reminder it wasn't a dream. Sitcoms follow the same pattern: ordinary world, pre-credits often. Call to adventure, but refusal at first. Then antics, story, attempts at problem-solving, failure, getting up again... Then the utter chaos, 18mins into our sitcom, our character's darkest hour, or minute, or few seconds. They face their fears, their biggest hurdle, they're embarrassed, humiliated, but find inner strength. Then the show's epilogue, wrapping up, resetting for next week. What have we learned?

Well what have we learned? I've learned that this story pattern is everywhere in life with all its challenges. The ordinary world of our youth may feel comfortable, or we may grow up quickly. When we tiptoe into life's adventure, there are risks, mentors and foes. Ultimately we face *seemingly* insurmountable challenges – but we survive and come back stronger.

The hero's journey is there even in the Bible – The Greatest Story Ever Told (although Inception was quite good). The Good Book echoes life's story-pattern: A comfortable perfect world gives way to tests, allies, enemies; and when the challenge becomes too great for *us*, Jesus journeys to the darkest point, the innermost cave... death, from which he rises. Like in that story pattern, maybe something is left behind, the message and spirit, a reminder that it's not a dream. That the ending is a happy one, that life is a comedy. There's an uplift. An ascension even. Life's great punchline. Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side.

So why the long face? Let's laugh and live and love, safe in the knowledge, that if there's an afterlife, there's an afterlaugh, but the communal joy will keep going forever. Knock and the door shall be opened unto you. Knock knock. Who's there? One day, I hope to tell you.