

THEY WHO LAUGH LAST LAUGH BEST

Clergy Conferences often take one down peculiar rabbit holes. I went down one the other week. Something our presenter said made me remember an important book by the art historian Leo Steinberg called *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. Now, if that isn't a title to make you sit up and take notice, I don't know what is! In it, Steinberg traces the fascination—I think that's the word—Renaissance artists had in depicting the private parts of the infant Jesus (and, sometimes, of the dead Jesus) and how subsequent generations were both appalled and embarrassed by such portrayals. But Steinberg contends that they weren't meant to either titillate or enrage. They were simply meant to underscore Jesus' full humanity.

I'll leave you to discover his book for yourself—or not. What interests me is how we really do have trouble envisaging Jesus as fully human, as having the same feelings, drives, and desires you and I have. Sure, we can imagine Jesus being hungry and eating, especially since much of his teaching happened over a meal. We can see him sleeping. We know he drank. He even got angry. But there are other things we don't think of him doing. And I'm not thinking about sexuality. I'm thinking of perfectly ordinary—and innocent—things like laughing.

The idea of Jesus laughing makes me think of an elegant friend back home who was deeply spiritual but also deeply suspicious of conventional piety. I remember her delight in telling me about an unusual picture of Jesus she kept on her desk. "And what makes it so unusual?" I asked. "It depicts him laughing," she replied.

Maybe our inability to think of Jesus as laughing—and perhaps in even thinking of Christianity as a religion of joy—is a hangover from the days of the Greek gods. Since Dionysus was a god of laughter linked with sexual excess and inebriation—both of which our spiritual tradition condemns—we've made faith into something dour, mind-numbing, and strait laced. Think about how we were taught to behave in church, especially since the liturgy has customarily been thought of as a very serious thing—Solemn High Mass, and all of that. And I know all too well that old habits are hard to break, since I was taught to never smile at the altar—all of my clergy friends were—which admittedly is a strange thing to be taught to do when one is giving thanks.

I think my friend's drawing of a laughing Jesus spoke to her because she had been through some dark things and the Church hadn't always been helpful. Or at least, she

didn't find the conventional churchy tropes and attitudes to be helpful, which no doubt is why she came to rail against them. She was in good company. Tallulah Bankhead was an habitu   of St. Mary the Virgin, a famous Anglo-Catholic shrine off Times Square—the kind of church where everyone in the chancel was properly solemn. There's a life-size crucifix at the back of the church and as Tallulah passed it one Christmas Eve she stopped and said, "Smile, darling. It's your birthday." Sometimes laughter is the best medicine, even in the face of death.

Speaking of laughter and death, in the spring of 2011, I went to Harvard for my friend Peter Gomes's memorial service. The eulogists were a grand lot, including the President of the university and the Governor of Massachusetts. I don't really remember much of what they said, but I *do* remember there being lots of raucous laughter in the grand and proper Memorial Church.

After the service, a number of us went to luncheon where the laughter continued. When it was over, I distinctly remember all of us walking down John F Kennedy Street in gales of laughter when a man handing out religious tracts stepped in front of us. "Hello, gentlemen. How are you?" he asked. For some reason his intrusion set me off and I snapped back, "Not very well. We've just been at a funeral!" The man looked at me with a surprised expression, but we laughed all the more at the ridiculousness of my reply.

So why doesn't the ridiculousness of our faith make us laugh?—not with derision, but with delight. Because, when you think about it, it *is* ridiculous and the things we profess *are*—at least by the world's standards—absurd. They are to laugh. The absurdity of it all is what made Sarah laugh, too. So laughable did she find it that she named her miracle baby Isaac, which means "He will laugh." Interestingly, Isaac was the only one of the three great patriarchs whose name wasn't changed—you'll remember Abram became Abraham and Jacob become Israel—which says something about the importance of laughter and faith.

Now, you and I know how infectious laughter can be, and we also know that we want our faith to be infectious. So why isn't it? Maybe it's because the Christian default is a kind of joylessness. Maybe it's because much of the Church has shouted at people, scolded them, argued with them when all along it should have been laughing with them—not at them. And even more than this, maybe it's because we haven't learned to laugh at ourselves.

But we *have* learned to be embarrassed—and even ashamed. How often have we tried to hide our faith, or cover it up, afraid that someone will point and laugh at us with scorn? "You don't really believe that—do you?"

Well, we do. At least, we struggle to believe it. All of which brings me back to Leo Steinberg and his analysis of Renaissance pictures. Those artists were right to draw attention to Jesus' full humanity as a way of making plain the wild, improbable, laughable truth of it all: God became who we are so we could become what he is. The

truth that even the most sterile of places and people can be animated by the joy of faith.

Yes, faith's a serious business, but that doesn't mean it isn't a joyous one, too. It's serious insofar as it asks us to live into the deepest mysteries of what it means to be human. We're not called to live on the surface, forever distracted by one gag or another. Yet it's joyous because it tells us that life's promise, no matter how wonderfully absurd and unexpected, is made new every morning. It's joyous because it gives us the counterpoint—antidote?—to all of life's troubling events that make us want to weep. And most of all, it's joyous because it tells us that even in the face of the most troubling event of all—death—God's got the last laugh.