

Mardi Gras Tuesday:
Christian Laughter and Crying
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Can the subject of our reflection for Mardi Gras Tuesday be anything but laughter?

We do not mean the sublime heavenly joy that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, nor the joy that “spiritual persons” like to talk about in soft, gentle terms (a joy that can easily produce a somewhat insipid and sour effect, like the euphoria of a harmless, balanced, but essentially stunted person). No, we mean real laughter, resounding laughter, the kind that make people double over and slap their thigh, the kind that brings tears to the eyes; the laughter that accompanies spicy jokes, the laughter that reflects the fact that a human being is no doubt somewhat childlike and childish. We mean the laughter that is not very pensive, the laughter that ceremonious people (passionately keen on their dignity) righteously take amiss in themselves and in others. This is the laughter we mean. Is it possible for us to reflect on this laughter? Yes, indeed, very much so. Even laughable matters are very serious. Their seriousness, however, dawns only on the one who takes them for what they are: laughable. ...

In the most pessimistic book of the Bible we read: “There is a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Eccl 3:4). This is what laughter tells us first of all: there is a time for everything. The human being has no fixed dwelling place on this earth, not even in the inner life of the heart and mind. Life means change. Laughter tells us that if as a people of the earth we wanted to be always in the same fixed state of mind and heart, if we wanted always to brew a uniform mixture out of every virtue and disposition of the soul (a mixture that would always and everywhere be just right), laughter tells us that fundamentally this would be a denial of the fact that we are created beings. To want to escape from the atmospheric conditions of the soul—the human soul that can soar as high as the heavens in joy and be depressed down to death in grief—to want to escape by running under the never-changing sky of imperturbability and insensitivity: this would be inhuman. It would be stoical, but it would not be Christian. This is what laughter tells us first of all.

It speaks to us and says, “You are a human being, you change, and you are changed, changed without being consulted and at a moment’s notice. Your status is the inconstancy of transformation. Your lot is to stop and rest at no one status. You are a manifold, incalculable being that never factors out without a remainder. The being that can be broken down into no common denominator other than that which is called God—which you are not, and never will be. Woe to you if, while immersed in time, you should want to be the never-changing, the eternal; you would be nothing but death, a dried up, withered person.” ...

Laugh. For this laughter is an acknowledgement that you are a human being, an acknowledgment of God. For how else is a person to acknowledge God except through admitting in her life and by means of her life that she herself is not God but a creature, that her times—a time to weep and a time to laugh, and the one is not the other. A praising of God is what laughter is, because it lets a human being be human. ...

We are thinking here of that redeeming laughter that springs from a childlike and serene heart. It can exist only in one who is not a “heathen,” but who like Christ (Heb 4:15; cf. 1 Pt 3:8) has thorough love for all and each, the free, detached “sympathy” that can accept and see everything as it is: the great greatly, the small smally, the serious seriously, the laughable with a laugh. Because all these exist, because there are great and small, high and low, sublime and ridiculous, serious and comical, because God wills these to exist—that is why this should be recognized, that is why the comical and the

ridiculous should be laughed at. But the only one who can do this is the person who does not adapt everything to himself, the one who is free from self, and who like Christ can “sympathize” with everything; the one who possesses that mysterious sympathy with each and everything, and before whom each can get a chance to have its say.

But only the person who loves has this sympathy. And so, laughter is a sign of love. Unsympathetic people (people who cannot actively “sympathize” and who thus become passively unsympathetic as well) cannot really laugh. They cannot admit that not everything is momentous and significant. They always like to be important and they occupy themselves only with what is momentous. They are anxious about their dignity, they worry about it; they do not love, and that is why they do not even laugh. But we want to laugh and we are not ashamed to laugh. For it is a manifestation of the love of all things in God. Laughter is a praise of God, because it lets a human being be a loving person.

God laughs. He laughs the laughter of the carefree, the confident, the unthreatened. He laughs the laughter of divine superiority over all the horrible confusion of universal history that is full of blood and torture and insanity and baseness. God laughs. *Our* God laughs; he laughs deliberately; one might almost say that he laughs gloatingly over misfortunes and is aloof from it all. He laughs sympathetically and knowingly, almost as if he were enjoying the tearful drama of this earth (he can do this, for he himself wept with the earth, and he, crushed even to death and abandoned by God, felt the shock of terror). He laughs, says scripture, and thus it tells us that an image and a reflection of the triumphant, glorious God of history and of eternity still shines in the final laugh that somewhere springs out from a good heart, bright as silver and pure, over some stupidity of this world. Laughter is praise of God because it is a gentle echo of God’s laughter, of the laughter that pronounces judgment on all history.

But it still is more, this harmless laughter of the loving heart. In the Beatitudes according to Luke (6:21), this is what we find: “Blessed are you who weep now, you shall laugh!” Of course this laughter is promised to those who weep, who carry the cross, those who are hated and persecuted for the sake of the Son of man. But it is *laughter* that is promised to them as a blessed reward, and we now have to direct our attention to that point.

Laughter is promised, not merely a gentle blessedness; an exaltation or a joy that wrings from the heart of tears of a surprising happiness. All this, too. But also laughter. Not only will our tears be dried up; not only will the great joy of our poor heart, which can hardly believe in eternal joy, overflow even to intoxication; no, not only this—we shall laugh! Laugh almost like the thrones; laugh as was predicted of the righteous (Ps 51:8). ...

Fools laugh, and so do the wise; despairing nonbelievers laugh, and so do believers. But we want to laugh in these days. And *our* laughter should praise God. It should praise him because it acknowledges that we are human. It should praise him because it acknowledges that we are people who love. It should praise him because it is a reflection and image of the laughter of God himself. It should praise him because it is the promise of laughter that is promised to us as victory in the judgment. God gave us laughter; we should admit this and—laugh.