



Editorial



**Matthew
van
Duyvenbode**

Matthew is Bible
Advocacy Officer at
Bible Society.

In a radio interview recently, the stand-up comedian Stephen K Amos was asked why there seems to be a renaissance of humour in popular culture. He immediately quipped back that it's because everybody is bored of cookery shows. A humorous retort with perhaps more than a grain of programming truth.

In the coming year, Peter Kay, Alan Carr and Michael McIntyre will be performing multiple nights to audiences at the kind of arenas normally only sold-out by U2. Whether you agree with Amos, or perhaps account for the rise of the ubiquitous panel show by looking to deep-seated economic anxieties and identity crises, it's undeniable that humour has found its way back into the cultural headlights.

Christianity and comedy have always enjoyed a complicated relationship. The ascetic and liturgical traditions have often associated laughter with immoderate behaviour. Yet amongst apologists and preachers, humour has frequently been employed as a tool for engagement and instruction. Richard Rolle explores this tension well in *The Fire of Love*: 'The holy lover of God shows himself neither too merry nor full heavy in this habitation of exile, but he has cheerfulness with ripeness. Forsooth some reprove laughter and some praise it. Laughter therefore which is from lightness and vanity of mind is to be reprov'd, but that truly that is of gladness of conscience and ghostly mirth is to be praised; the which is only in the righteous, and it is called mirth in the love of God. Wherefore if we be glad and merry, the wicked call us wanton; and if we be heavy, hypocrites.'¹

But just how funny was Jesus? Can humour be considered an attribute of the divine character? Do we discover a satirical streak in the Scriptures? And how do we judge what is 'mirth in the love of God'? We seek to explore these profound questions in a helpful – and occasionally humorous – context.

In our opening article, John Macauley kicks off with an attempt to define the nature of humour – acknowledging that the impossibility of a universally acceptable definition is analogous with telling 'a joke which everyone in the world would laugh at'. Macauley draws on the work of Morreall's theories of humour to categorise reasons for laughter – settling on the 'incongruity' theory as the most helpful for the Christian seeking to inhabit the world of humour.

Building on insights from the social nature of jokes, Macauley warns those who preach of the dangers of exclusivity, noting the impact of context as much as the content of social humour. He then proceeds to offer some practical words of advice about over-explanation, inappropriate humour, past experiences and the delivery of a funny story.

For Macauley, we discover this kind of incongruous humour in the stories of Scripture. Rather than seeing this as a trivialisation, then, he suggests that humour 'points out what has been accepted and what does not have to be; change is possible'. Ultimately, Macauley argues, humour can become a redeeming experience.

In our second article, James and Kate Williams note how humour, laughter and comedy overlap. In asking the question '(how) should we use humour?', the

Williams' simultaneously ask '(when) should we laugh?' In a helpful review of the historical anxiety between Christianity and humour, the Williams's conclude that 'humour *is* found in the Church, but possibly without us plugging it in to our theology'. In a bid to counteract the prevalent portrayal of the 'dour Christian', the Williams's survey the scriptural uses of humour.

Broader than these, though, James and Kate Williams argue for a scriptural narrative of salvation that can be read as a divine comedy, seeing that 'this story culminates in rejoicing, the rejoicing of God and of people reconciled to God, people who have died and been raised with Christ to enjoy eternal life. Grace is the ultimate reversal of fortune.'

The Williams's are not suggesting a blanket approval for humour, however, and conclude by examining some sensitivities, as well as recommending a series of practical missional responses to the opportunities that humour provides. In this, they provocatively quote Os Guinness's words: 'How do we speak to an age made spiritually deaf by its scepticism and morally colour-blind by its relativism? The prosaic sermon and the laboured apology have proved ineffective ... One contribution must surely come from a wide rediscovery of the prophetic fool making of the divine subversive.'

In our next article, Cheryl Taylor uses a broad approach to defining humour, which affords her the scope to explore the nature of divine humour from both positive and negative perspectives. As she does so, she unpacks how she perceives the nature of God's laughter as described in the Bible.

Firstly, Taylor argues that 'God laughs at us' – understanding that 'there is a theological significance in the connections between humour and the theme of God's judgment. The careful reader of Scripture is aware that God laughs a lot at human folly.' God's ridicule of idolaters, Taylor suggests, demonstrates that one dimension of humour in the Bible is 'iconoclastic, designed to smash pretensions'.

Acknowledging that the idea of God laughing at us is incomplete, Taylor proposes that judgement precedes salvation – 'God laughs with us'. The root of this laughter is in God's parenthood, forgiveness and transcendence, with faith being our key to participation in the divine laughter. Noting the significance of joy in the life of the Christian, Taylor encourages us to see humour as a vital element of discipleship and relevant for theological consideration.

Paul Kerensa's witty piece on the limits of comedy is full of joy. A stand-up comedian himself, Kerensa opens with an assessment on the current state of the comedy world, encompassing live comedy, TV shows and the web. In amongst these increasingly desensitized arenas, Kerensa asks whether it is 'the new 'edgy' to be not edgy?'

Kerensa reviews recent developments in what is acceptable, looking back at comedians such as Bernard

Manning and Roy Walker to chart the shift in limits and audience culture, summarising that 'there will continue to be boundaries, reflecting the mood of the nation, and comedians will try to push them.'

The piece concludes with an argument for the faith-based audience to support clean comedy acts, as well as specifically Christian or all-age comedy projects. Kerensa argues that it is the public who will ultimately determine the future of humour which doesn't transgress limits.

Another practitioner of comedy, Olive Fleming Drane, provides a distinctive voice in her article on clowning in Christian ministry. A clown herself, Drane provides a history of the holy fool, noting that in first-century Roman culture 'they were the political commentators and newscasters of their day, offering exaggerated images of reality as a way of getting to the real issues'.

Drane draws on the Gospel presentations of Christ turning the expected into the unexpected and the powerless into the powerful. Using these themes, she highlights the connections of this subversion with the historical development of the clown, culminating in the example of the general public undermining communist authority in 1980's Warsaw by dressing as clowns.

Drane argues that Christian clowning offers us a route to authenticity in how we witness to faith: 'Humour is one way of doing that, especially when we are enabled to laugh at ourselves, for by doing so we accept the fact that we are part-hero and part-fool, part-success and part-failure.'

In our final article, Peter Morden examines the use of humour in the life and preaching of Charles Spurgeon, who he notes was one of the most influential preachers of the Victorian era. Spurgeon, Morden believes, has gained an unwarranted reputation as a sombre figure, which belies the humour in his preaching, writing and relationships with others.

Sharing some of Spurgeon's puns, stories and quick-wittedness, Morden demonstrates the preacher as a man well-acquainted with humour and its impact on his audience. Spurgeon persisted in his wittiness despite illness and suffering later in his life, and Morden argues that this provides a challenge to contemporary readers, noting that 'his humour was ultimately sustained by a real relationship with the authentic Jesus.'

Encouraging us to take Spurgeon as an example of a preacher who, because of his humour and simple stories, was able to communicate with everyday people, Morden concludes by asking the question, 'do we have the same desire to communicate, and the same willingness to be despised as we share the good news of Jesus in the language of ordinary people?'

This is perhaps a fitting question on which to end this introduction to this edition of *Transmission*. May you be encouraged, challenged, provoked and inspired as you read. And you're allowed a little chuckle, too.

Notes

1. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life* (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 45. Rolle was a fourteenth-century hermit and contemplative.