

## Pastoral Letter 6

Dear Friends

Whilst the average child laughs a hundred and fifty times a day, say researchers at the University of Michigan, the average adult laughs just fifteen times.

As chaplain to a largely secular institution I am well aware of the focus many people place upon the restrictive factors in Christianity. Society would often see religion as existing to prevent us from enjoying the good things of life, shunning the need for pleasure and destroying every aspect of fun and joy.

May I suggest that this is a serious misconception. Christianity is life to excess since at the centre of the Gospel Jesus declares 'I have come that they may have life and live it to the full'. Indeed, one might say it is religion, in fact, which built joy and excitement, happiness, satisfaction, fun and holy leisure right into the fabric of life in the first place.

When we consider the history of our monarchs down the ages, for instance, it was Christianity which built freedom and feasting into the business of life. Similarly when peasants and servants lived in servitude to those more powerful it was religion that incorporated freedom into their calendars by providing 'holy days' (holidays).

Furthermore, one has only to consider the Jewish religion to recognise the importance of rest and recreation in observing the weekly Sabbath, making provision for fiestas and fun, as well as structure, discipline and prayer.

The Church's year, punctuated by festivals, points to the teachings of the faith, celebrating the presence of God in life. Indeed, the example of Jesus tells us that life is more than life, more than the drudge of getting through it. In celebration we find a higher self -

the whole person, the one who as the writer of the Psalms says, knows that 'the Lord is sweet'.

So the festivals of the Church (as with the season of Easter we're still celebrating) sweeten life. They affirm human feelings, all of them, sad as well and happy - inviting reflection and exuberance - feasting as well as fasting.

I've been sharing an exquisite painting 'All Are Welcome' by the German artist Sieger Köder during my on-line seminars with pupils this week. Jesus sits at the head of the table as one would expect at the Last Supper. But the other participants are somehow unforeseen. Women, people from a number of ethnicities and a circus clown in full regalia all join him at table. I believe this picture speaks pertinently to the church and indeed our own school community. We work very hard to encourage and celebrate diversity, strikingly demonstrated in one of the hymns we sometimes sing in chapel :

*Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live.  
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of  
grace;*

*Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:*

*All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

A few years ago we hosted a couple of clown services in the school chapel inviting a much respected priest, Father David Roualeyn Findlater Bain to preach - who incidentally was known by all affectionately as 'Roly the priest clown'.

He applied his greasepaint, sported baggy trousers, spangled jacket and ridiculously huge shoes to perform his 'sermon' to the amusement, awe and delight of us all. And this was certainly not about gimmicks nor the mocking of religion. Roly's clowning was a

vehicle for expressing his deep faith in God enthusing others to recognise the Gospel's fun but profound message.

He performed daring and hilarious antics but there was always a valuable lesson behind his frivolity, whether he was precariously walking along a circus rope between altar and pulpit; pushing a needle through a balloon or throwing a custard pie at the Headteacher.

But, as we sometimes know about clowns, Roly wasn't an extrovert. On the contrary he was often described as 'a vulnerable lover'. His work as a priest clown exposed him to the possibility of being harmed; financially insecure; an itinerant carrying out a physically and mentally demanding role. Moreover, some accused him of playing the fool to boost his own ego. So the place of a clown (and a priest) sets women and men in a vulnerable position.

In his parables Jesus spoke, amongst other things, about salt, yeast and light and encouraged his followers to become those things. Salt in bland times; yeast in flat times and light in dark times. Humour, then, is salt, yeast and light. Humour is a gift for everyone.

For all its splendour, and sometimes pomposity, the Christian Church is, like any other institution, manifestly human. And with that humanity comes some laughter, both intentional and unintentional. This is a gift from God who wants us to enjoy ourselves, appreciate some of the absurdities of life and not take ourselves so seriously. This has been a necessity for many of us engaged in pastoral ministry over the years where sometimes humour, generosity, love and life have been sadly lacking.

During this time of national and global uncertainty there's much serious discussion and reflection to be had, of course. But humour, fun, laughter, slapstick and letting ones hair down (when we could all presently benefit from a visit to the hairdressers!) has a vital part to play.

I learned recently of a postal worker who has decided to sport fancy dress whilst on his daily round in order to help lift people's spirits during the lockdown. I've also witnessed many examples of Easter bonnets worn by women and men together with some delicious examples of outrageously flamboyant costumes donned in celebration of this season of hope. We all need to capture such exhilaration during our periods of doom and gloom.

I'll end with an anecdote.

A well-known hotel chain, when looking for five hundred people to fill positions for a new facility, interviewed five thousand candidates. The hotel managers interrogating these applicants excluded all candidates who smiled fewer than four times during the interview. This applied to people competing for jobs in all categories.

Humour has a vital place in the life which God desires for us all.

With laughter and love

Father Andrew