

A SERIOUS PLAYFULNESS

By JOSEPH C. McLELLAND

In the beginning was laughter

ONCE THERE WAS A CHILD named Laughter. This odd name was given him by his astonished parents, since he was born when they were in their nineties. His birth was the result of a promise given by divine messengers. They announced some good news: God cares for humankind and desires a special people to serve as channels of blessing and peace. This covenant would come through the special child given to an ageing couple as a sign of Life. The story of their argument with the messengers—they considered the whole thing a huge joke—is the heart of gospel, ‘good news’. For God had the last laugh: when the human pair learned to share *that* joke they learned what grace is. So they laughed twice—the difference and distance between their laughter at God and their laughter with God is what we mean by ‘serious playfulness’. If we are only playful we will miss what is decisive in life; if we are merely serious we will miss God’s punch line.

The point was that Abraham and Sarah knew they were impotent to provide the line of descendants necessary to carry the divine promise. At first they thought their servant Eliezer might be the heir of the covenant as he would be of their goods. But God vetoed that plan. So they made further provision, according to the social etiquette of their time—Abraham fathered Ishmael through his concubine Hagar: that should do the trick. But God had other plans. The real ‘provision’ (Providence) did not stick at the problem of ageing, or barrenness. It provided a solution that seemed miraculous to the couple themselves. The absurdity of a couple of impotents having another child struck them as so funny that they laughed in the face of the messengers. Abraham in fact felt called to offer apologies for Sarah, doubled over inside the tent.

Nine months later Sarah got the joke. She named her son Laughter (*Isaac* in their Hebrew language) saying: ‘All who hear will laugh with me’. You can read all about it in the book called Genesis, chapters 16

to 25. But do you really *hear* it?—if you call yourself Christian, do you chuckle along with Sarah every day?

The humour of the situation turns on the fact that Laughter's mother was post-menopausal, as we say today. That is, having children was an impossibility. This human powerlessness will become a constant in the story of God's covenant with Israel. It is a kind of litany: Sarah was barren . . . Rebekah was barren . . . and Rachel . . . also Manoah's wife (anonymous) . . . Hannah (apparently) . . . and at last Elizabeth and her virgin cousin Mary. So these brothers of Isaac are a sort of lineage of Providence: Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph, Samson, Samuel, and at last John the Baptist and Jesus. It forms a pattern, as if our own arrangements for the future fall short. If there are promises to be kept, gods to honour, a future to raise our hopes, we are not up to it. Only if God is faithful to his word, only if he can provide alternatives, will there be more to come. It is as if human deadness is the opportunity for divine presence: resurrection. If there is God, there is Easter, the joy of spring after winter.

Now the humour became serious through an uncanny event. This same Abraham and his special son Isaac had a little drama of their own to act out. When the boy was older, Abraham was put to a test, commanded to offer Isaac in sacrifice. Up the mountain they went—father, son, donkey, knife, wood and fire for the fatal ritual. What mixed emotions seethed in the bosom of Abraham! This was not only his son but the special child of divine promise. Not his idea or his doing, like Ishmael. Isaac was the child born out of season so that the promise could be fulfilled, the great hosts of the future could be born and live out the divine covenant. Everything depended on him, on his survival. Or so God had said—had the all-knowing One forgotten?

In fact Isaac was spared, a lamb was provided (Pro-vidence again) at the last moment. This cliffhanger occurred on a mountain fittingly named Vision (Moriah). What Abraham saw was that God's sense of humour is incorrigible: how can you kill the Laughter bestowed by grace? But at first the commandment seemed as serious as every law. What Abraham learned was that to take it seriously has deadly results; but that a surprise may come to turn law into gospel. And when good news breaks into our tragic affairs, laughter is born again. God taught Abraham that faith is as fragile as the flesh and blood of our children, that we are always one generation away from losing everything.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard bids us picture the same little group *descending* the mountain. Outwardly nothing has changed, but

inwardly Abraham knows that Isaac will always be a gifted child. God will always come between them, like a mediator, or a host presenting them to each other all the days of their lives.¹ Here is the very model of Christian vocation—your life is a calling from God, giving you a place in his good creation; and of stewardship—all that you have is a gift, not possession (ownership) but loan (responsibility).

And something more, much more decisive—all the generations must negotiate this narrow gate, this helpless infant. Our own provision and expectation prove powerless. In this regard, we are all impotent, laughing at God's promise. Hope can displace scepticism only if God will do something special. *Not our Ishmaels but his Isaacs.* Abraham learned this in his encounter with the messengers. (A further irony is that the one who talked was the Logos or Word of God, according to theologians. Whenever and wherever God speaks it is God's Word. So Abraham was talking with his descendant the Christ, as it were.) Anyway, when Abraham heard the absurd proposal he quickly reminded them that he had already thought of how the covenant could be guaranteed. 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' As if to say: Don't worry God, I've thought of everything!

Isaac's thirteen-year-old stepbrother Ishmael, however, was not part of this arrangement, even though he had been circumcised. He was sent away, chiefly at Sarah's insistence (how short was her laughter!). But another promise was made to him, for Hagar's children also have their Word from God: 'I will make him a great nation' (Gen 21,18). The Ishmaelites remind us of God's other children and other covenants, in this case the peoples of Arabia, the religion of Islam. For Abraham is father to three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Divine images

The Story so well begun did not continue smoothly. The covenant people kept mistaking God's care for indulgence. They thought they had it made, as it were, instead of having to make history by faithful loving—that is, taking care for others, for creation, for what the divine Word commended and commanded as the right way of being human (of human be-ing). It is not easy to distinguish care, that is, whether we should be careful or careless or carefree. 'Take no care for tomorrow' said Jesus, 'live like birds or flowers.' Some of his followers have tried just that, and sometimes it has even worked.

Mostly, however, we take this strong saying to be Jesus's way of warning against Abraham's original sin of thinking that everything depended on him. For Jesus it was more like trusting God's Word to be right about the sort of carefree care or playful seriousness which being human ought to mean.

The deepest of questions for both believers and unbelievers is 'what is God like?' Most unbelievers reject 'God' because they cannot accept what believers say about deity. Often what they say is wrong, and therefore unbelievers are right to reject their bad theology. Theology's first question is always: what is *appropriate* to God? What qualities may we properly ascribe to divinity? In what sense do we mean that God is powerful or loving, is able to suffer? Great controversies always attend theology from age to age as we try to cleanse our human speech about God. The bible is not so clear or so consistent that we can merely quote its words. As critics point out, it tells us that God is both wrathful and loving, all-powerful yet allowing and even causing evil, both high above history yet becoming human, and so on. Even if we were to call these paradoxes we must acknowledge the difficulty in grasping their meaning. Grave mistakes have resulted from taking them seriously but not playfully, most notably taking God as a celestial tyrant moving us about like pawns.

So let us pursue the Story which casts God as one of the actors in a drama. He is not the ancient Greek 'God from the machine' who is larger than life, raised on the godwalk (and on high heels at that) above the stage. Zeus sounds out his final decree when the human story is too entangled for us to solve. Nor is he a voice offstage whispering lines to forgetful actors. Sometimes, to be sure, the scriptures talk like that. Abraham and Sarah thought that God Almighty was intervening in human affairs. So God was, but She's no Zeus. God prefers to act through intermediaries, human agents and historical events. Opening barren wombs is a sign that another Actor is with us on stage, but it is the kind of sign that tells us God will not overthrow human ways entirely. Means of grace may be abnormal but they are not anti-normal. Or perhaps it shows that the 'norm' is broader, more complex, than we think.

To imagine what God is like demands energy and openness. If the bible is so complex and deep in meaning, we cannot expect to understand it easily. In a remarkable last will and testimony, Martin Luther noted how hard it is to understand nature, the world and scripture. For the first you have to be 'a shepherd or farmer for five

years'. For the second, you must spend twenty-five years in politics. For the third, even guiding the Church for a hundred years will not suffice. 'Do not try to follow this divine Aeneid journey, but kneel down in worship with bowed heads over the imprint where He has stepped. We are beggars. That is true.'²

Luther thought that one must accept a 'calling', a vocation to pursue the mysteries of nature or of history. Even greater is the demand when one follows the biblical Story. This good news is won only as a prize for those willing to run and strive. But you get the prize at the start of the race, you become as a child again, you discover that your running and striving, your work and accomplishments are the *result* of faith and not its *cause*. That is, by accepting the covenant as Abraham and Sarah did, as a gift beyond your deserving or your power, you are set free from concern for paying your way or demanding your rights. It is called 'justification by faith' and it means that justice comes from a loving God: all is right with God. And therefore—this *therefore* signals the punch line in the divine humour—therefore we are freed from lifestyles of merit and pride, we are free to enjoy creation, make history, love one another, tell funny stories and call all our children after the one named Laughter.

God justifies humans according to his own logic of love—taking their burdens, healing their wounds, co-operating with their efforts. This sets us free from false burdens of pride and merit. You get everything when you know you do not deserve anything. This sounds simplistic; sometimes it is, but there are always saints and holy fools around to show how it works. The logic of love goes like this: if you truly love someone, you do not care what rewards there are, how useful the other can be to you. Indeed, the joy of love comes from the *uselessness* of the beloved: love him just because he is there; let her *be*. It's as if utility and enjoyment are opposites: the more usefulness, the less joy. You would sacrifice everything for the sake of your beloved. It is something like this with us and God. We seek a Power which will prove useful in our lives—health, wealth, happiness. But we encounter a Love that offers nothing but itself; in fact it promises suffering and loss rather than pleasure and goods. It is worse than useless, it is counter-productive. In this case we find ourselves caught by the ultimate Lover. Can it be that God is absolutely useless, and *therefore* absolutely enjoyable?

Great theologians have explored this royal game of divine love. Two of the greatest, Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross, witness in different ways to the supreme Joy who crowns all our striving with

perfections beyond our imagining. The magnificent theological system erected by Thomas is a kind of game played for the sheer joy of following the concepts and categories which human minds throw at the moving target named 'God'. But near the end of his life Thomas gave up his writing after a vision of the living Christ one day at Mass. He wrote only one more thing, a commentary on the Song of Songs. That love poetry between God and Israel was the trademark of Christian mystics. John of the Cross was one of the greatest, as was Teresa of Avila, whose confessor he was. They learned from experience that encountering God is like falling in love. Ecstasy it may be, but every lover knows also the pain. Pain of desire, of doubt, of absence. Teresa put it simply: *divina pati*, 'to suffer divine things'.

Pain and pleasure, suffering and joy: we are talking the language of drama here. Are saints and mystics correct to join the two kinds of human experience so closely? Are both tragedy and comedy forms of one 'live theatre'? Which one has the last word to say on stage: the tragic or the comic?

Comedy and tragedy

In theatre, protagonist and antagonist share an *agon*, a testing or suffering. The bible also—like a script for the human drama, a guidebook for the tours of hell and sideshows of purgatory which make up our history. Sometimes glimpses of heaven are included to relieve the pain. That is what the great poet Dante grasped when he called his sweeping epic of purgatory, hell and heaven 'Comedy'. When we mistakenly call it 'Divine comedy' we miss his point. It is *our* comedy, the human story.

Comedy and tragedy spring from different views of life, of reality. Tragedy is considered the nobler of the two, since it deals with heroes, larger-than-life characters whom we praise and try to imitate. Or we learn from their fate as they reach too high and fall to their doom. Comedy, on the other hand, deals with clowns, fools and buffoons. They are lower characters and we laugh at them and learn from their mistakes. So far, the classical analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* seems adequate. But what if something more is going on in comedy? Could it be that the resilience of the clown, falling and rising again, holds the truth, and not the fall of the hero? The one lies still as death; his body is raised on shoulders and slowly borne offstage. But the other jumps back on his feet—scars and all—and laughs; and so do we.

The bible belongs to a certain kind of literature, which a leading literary critic has called 'romantic comedy'.³ Its romance lies in its

narrative of the hero's journey into the far country, a lonely and disputed passage, to slay the dragon, to receive a mortal wound, to fall in death. But the romance turns into comedy through a wondrous reversal of fortune (the mark of comedy) by which our hero is revived, rescues the princess from her doom, and makes the return journey to marry her. This last part is found in the book called *Revelation*—here are the stock characters of tragi-comedy: hero, beast, princess (the Church!), marriage feast.

We find ourselves in a world of contradictions, of struggle: life against death, light against darkness, good against evil. Tragedy traces the conflict to its bitter end, but comedy unveils a further Act, a finale in which things are set right, justified. But it is a justification by 'grace', by the surprising recovery and recognition of the wounded warrior whose renewal adds grace notes to the story. One artist who saw the parallel with his creation of possible worlds was J. R. R. Tolkien. His fantasies of Middle Earth, embattled and imperilled, contain a decisive turning point or crux, which he called 'eucatastrophe'. Speaking about 'the Consolation of the Happy Ending' he notes that the opposite of tragedy, and its answering reality, is 'the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn"'. This means deliverance from tragic doom or final defeat. It is '*evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief'.⁴

The tragic hero is a loner, but in comedy it is *society* that counts. Comic heroes are spurred to action on behalf of their neighbours, or of an innocent victim. (Charlie Chaplin never could resist a face of innocence. Or beauty.) And if there is treasure to be won—dragons always hoard jewels—then it will be for the good of all, for the common wealth. The final scene should therefore be a wedding, signifying the creation of an extended family and the renewal of the race. Even Gilbert and Sullivan knew that, in their farcical endings: the uglies marry the uglies and the beautiful people each other. They also knew the value of the 'recognition scene'—Frederick, for instance, was supposed to have been apprenticed in Penzance to pilots not pirates, so he is really a hero in disguise. There is a certain logic at work, a fitting conclusion to our social life. Tragedy moves us with its heroics, but comedy invites us to a wedding and makes jokes about having babies.⁵

Jubilee and Utopia

A serious playfulness teaches us that we are all in the same boat, and it is a ship of fools. But by unmasking the pretensions of those

who think too highly of themselves, the clown dis-orders society and unveils the truth of human relationships: on our own we are nothing; what is good must be received from another. ('What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?'—1 Cor 4,7). So these 'others' who share the human condition and adventure may be nuisances or even enemies, but our salvation is tied up with their destiny. Clowns are marginal figures, living on the edge of polite society: missionaries of the extraordinary. Only on the edge can they reveal the truth about our life together, about the inexorable tie between love for neighbours and for God. Clowns are thus fools with a serious intent, children of Mary who sang of bringing the proud low and raising the humble. The *Magnificat* is their anthem and Utopia their goal.

Utopia—'happy place' (and also 'no place')—is the plan for human being, for society, tossed by fools into our serious politics, economics, academics and religion. It offers a different vision, a contradictory hope for our life together. The Jewish hope was formalized as 'Jubilee', a word derived from the sound of trumpets. This was the crown of religious holy days, the ultimate Festival. Following a sabbath of sabbaths (forty-nine years), the fiftieth was set aside, consecrated, to liberty and celebration. Land would enjoy a fallow season, debts forgiven, slaves set free. (See Leviticus 25.) When land and debtors and all sorts of property are 'redeemed', we have an occasion of release from bondage, from legal arrangements, from social norms. It is a time of freedom, holiday, carnival. How ironic that the modern 'carnival' ('farewell to flesh') has become an extravagant binge before the sombre denials of Lent. Our theme of comic release suggests that Lent may be a denial of gospel, that Christian life is more like a Carnival, a time of liberation and celebration. Or that in the rhythm of Carnival and Lent mourning must always let joy have the last word.

At last we come to the crucial issue. Is comedy simply the displacement of tragedy, and gospel the opposite of law? Does Easter make Calvary outdated, so that suffering is no longer an appropriate symbol for human being? The excesses of clowns and fools may suggest so, but experience teaches us that their vision too is partial. The utopian vision affords an ultimate perspective on all that we do, but it is not a programme for the present order. It brings hope, and hope means looking to the future. We are to build our new life on that hope, on the expectation of divine presence—we are like doubting Sarah, about to be surprised by Laughter. But our hope does not

displace the Cross of Christ; instead it adds a dimension, the extra mile that God went in his Easter revelation. The forty days from Easter to Ascension mark the special time of comic release, the recognition scene in the Garden and the upper room and Emmaus: it is the Crucified who endures. Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the disciples who saw the risen Lord, are comic heroes whose roles are no longer tragic. Now they break up with joy at amazing grace, they arrange banquets and rush to tell others the good news. The Cross is not outdated, but placed in a light from the future that shows its ultimate fruit, its power for reconciliation, for new life. It was said of father Abraham that in his testing, 'He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead'—now *that is* faith! (Heb 11,19).

Clowns are outsiders who tell us that someday outside will be in. Meanwhile they bid us remember the future, live as if the power of the new age is already at work among us (Heb 6,5). We are called to treat our neighbours in the light of God's love and promise. We hope well of all, including our own poor selves. We live in a Jubilee season, set others free as much as possible, blow trumpets. If we appear rude and somewhat mad to a suffering world, that is the sign that we are right with God's plan. God will have the last laugh, and so we live and work believing that the whole thing is part of his divine drama. We are in his play, and our roles are given us not as fixed assignments but as means of grace, opportunities for celebration. Utopia may be nowhere—yet. But in a sense it is reality, the Kingdom of Christ. He reigns in this meantime, between the old age and the new. His presence is that of the Crucified, but he is liberated from his bondage, freed from the tragic plot. He is therefore subject of both tragedy and comedy, both hero and clown: he survives, but with scars. We cannot follow him in his vicarious suffering, unique and unrepeatable; but we can follow him in the sacrifice of praise, the life of jubilation.

We started this little play of ideas with Isaac. We saw him as victim and victor, the child named Laughter who survived to play the role of the channel of blessing, the narrow gate through which all covenant folk must pass. This way of humour or playfulness is not free from suffering, pain, seriousness; but it is that which sustains us along the path despite life's contradictions, despite pains of body, mind or spirit, despite doubt and ignorance and backsliding. Because Jesus once cried out: 'Why have YOU forsaken ME?' we can rest in the surety that we are never forsaken. Even in our darkest hours, at bedside of the dying or graveside of the dead, in our own suffering and loss and fear of death—especially there we may hear the trumpet

of victory and hope. Such is the good news from Jesus, descendant of Isaac, doorway to Life. If the biblical witness is correct, the last Act involves a universal recognition scene, a comic and cosmic Revelation. The desire of all nations will be met and Sabbath and Pentecost, Jubilee and Utopia—along with the festive hopes of all peoples on this and other planets—will find their fulfilment in the greater Kingdom of God.

NOTES

¹ Kierkegaard, S.: *Fear and trembling* (Doubleday Anchor, 1954). 'The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac—the contradiction spells "dread" for Abraham' (p 41). Hence 'irony and humour' are 'essentially different from the passion of faith' (p 62).

² Kooiman, A., in *The mature Luther* (Luther College Press, 1959), pp 106ff.

³ Frye, Northrop: 'Pistis and Mythos', address to The Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Montreal, June 1972; cf *The great code: the bible and literature* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), pp 156, 169. But see *The secular scripture: a study of the structure of romance* (Harvard U.P., 1976), p 171: 'Comedy ends with a festive society. . . . belief is also primarily social in reference, which is why the Christian myth is a comedy rather than a romance.'

⁴ 'On fairy-stories', in C. S. Lewis, ed: *Essays presented to Charles Williams* (Eerdmans, 1966), p 81.

⁵ Cf McLelland, J. C.: *The clown and the crocodile* (Richmond VA: John Knox Press, 1970), pp 79ff.