

Theological colleges are stuffed with all sorts of strange people. Some are more peculiar even, than those training for the ordained ministry. People, for example, who have spent the last 20 years preparing a thesis on the second chapter of the prophet Joel and are just putting the finishing touches to their views of that all important first verse. Or the person everybody assumes is one of the cleaning staff who turns out to be the Bishop of Vanuatu on a 6 months sabbatical. It is not quite that 'all of life is there'; but the odder bits are certainly rather over-represented.

Perhaps the most eccentric of all the lifeforms at my *alma mater* St Stephen's House- and that's quite an achievement in the annals of eccentricity- was Melissa. Unlike many in the higher echelons of Oxford university academia she had no disturbingly dangerous looking hats or socially leprous personal habits. She looked unremarkable, could hold an engaging and pleasant conversation that didn't lurch off unexpectedly into fairyland, and could happily walk down any high street without causing the crowds to part as she passed. However she was attempting one of the most ridiculous things anyone had yet heard of: she was trying to complete a PhD, the subject of which was women and humour in the Old Testament.

Not, one would have thought, the most promising of starters for a thesis. Even with the weird names and daft costumes, Ancient Israel does not seem to have been a laugh-a-minute place even for the blokes; how much less so for the women. The Hebrew scriptures are not side-splitting stuff. To make the area smaller still Melissa was an American Baptist, and thus those parts of our Old Testament which are actually quite rich in humour: the Carry-On farce of Tobit, the Benny Hill titillation of Susanna or the black humour of Judith were beyond the pale for her, or at least, outside the Scriptural canon. But, give Melissa her due and her sanity, there is humour of a kind to be found in the Old Testament amidst all the smiting, begetting and childbearing; not the the silly but unfunny practical jokes of the prophets, but humour in a form which, as a nation, the land of Shakespeare, holds especially dear, that of irony. Irony is scripture's favourite humorous device, from superannuated Sarah and Abraham thinking they have the joke on God to Nathan's trapping King David with the tale of the poor man and the ewe-lamb the Old Testament delights in having its characters say the precise opposite of what actually is, or what they mean.

Today, is Passion Sunday and here we come to the beginning of the end-game of the Gospels, a process which starts in John's gospel, at least, with the raising of Lazarus and ends at Calvary. There are not, it has to be said, many laughs in the Passion story.

Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday is tragedy, it is melodrama, there is no room for jokes, it is no time for a stand-up routine.

But our Gospels are works of Jewish literature, and though, by the standards of say, Jane Austen, they are crude literature indeed, they are liberally laced with irony; like the sherry in an especially alcoholic trifle, they are saturated with the stuff. But here is not irony for laughs, it is irony that bites, irony that hurts, sharp and piquant and just as humour can effectively be a means to deflate pomposity, shatter illusions and reveal uncomfortable realities so with the darker irony the bare, brutal truths are revealed.

St John loves irony. His gospel, which has been our sometime companion these Sundays of Lent, slaps it on thick like the lard on a drip buttie. If that cultural reference is a tad too northern for your frame of references, lets say that in John's gospel the different threads of meaning are combined into a restlessly complex and impressive fugal counterpoint.

Out of the mouths of the protagonists come inadvertent truths, truths they have no intention of uttering and indeed have no knowledge of uttering and yet utter none the less. Humanity has become like the idols it so readily worships: they have eyes but they do not see, they have ears but they cannot hear, they have mouths but utter only ironies. From the Samaritan woman to Nicodemus from the Pharisees to Peter to Pilate what they see they do not understand, what they think they understand they have wrong, and out of the mouths of the unknowing comes the truth unrecognised for what it is but truth none the less.

When Caiaphas says 'it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.', when Peter declaims 'I am not one of this man's disciples'; when the soldiers mockingly spit 'Hail King of the Jews'; when Pilate with a pat cliché of the age asks 'What is truth?'; it is with gall-bitter unconscious irony they speak.

At the raising of Lazarus at Bethany, everybody is saying something that actually means something else, onion-skinned layer upon layer of irony heaped up and teetering. The disciples say 'Lord if he has fallen asleep he will be alright.' If only they knew. 'Martha says 'I know he will rise again on the resurrection on the last day'. If only she knew. Mary says 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died'. If only she knew. The Jewish mourners see Jesus weeping and say 'see how he loved him': if only they knew.

It is only Jesus— who seems to his contemporaries to be talking in riddles and enigmas, a mutterer of mystic mumbo-jumbo— it is only Jesus who speaks with no hidden meaning. It is Jesus whose voice cuts razor-sharp through the confused cats-cradle tangle of misunderstanding and corrupted meaning.

Unfortunately as Bebe says in E M Forster's *A Room With a View* 'It is so difficult to understand somebody who always speaks the truth'

The disciples think they understand Jesus, but they don't. The Temple authorities and the Jewish intelligentsia think they know what Jesus is all about, but they don't. The Romans are certain they've got Jesus' number. But they haven't.

Jesus says on the cross 'forgive them lord for they know not what they do': They didn't...

But we do.

In the light of the resurrection, in the piercing, penetrating, radiance of Easter morning, the disciples stopped talking in riddles and at two removes from what they wanted to say; like a camera suddenly being brought into sharp focus what was previously an indistinct blur makes sense; the enigmatic sayings of the Son of Man couldn't be clearer; and the tense laughter of ironic humour is overtaken by the elation of joy.

In historical circles, hindsight is a much derided thing. Everyone, so the smart money says, is wise in hindsight. Perhaps. But are they? *Is everyone wise to the reality of Jesus?*

Christians have always been in a minority in the world. Even in the former heartlands of the faith the wisdom of hindsight is fading fast and the folly of faithlessness sweeps all before it. And who can help those born blind to Christ recover their hindsight but us? Who but us, with eyes wide open and hearts burning within us will run back to our town to tell them of the prophet we have met; who but us, can be Martha to our sisters and brothers and tell them 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you'? Who, but us, will take away the stone so that the voice of Christ can be heard loud and clear calling to those lost in the cold darkness of unbelief?