

Sara Laughed, Jesus Wept

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Scripture lessons: Genesis 18:1-15, Luke 19:41-44

Back before the summer I came across an article in *AdRem*, the Remonstrant magazine, in which one of my colleagues there was comparing Christianity and Buddhism – and, being typically Remonstrant, not in a way favourable to Christianity. One of the subheadings, lifted up out of the text in bold type, caught my eye immediately: “In comparison to Buddha, images of Jesus seldom if ever show him laughing.” The drift of her argument was that compared with Buddhism, Christianity, with its solemn Jesus and emphasis on suffering, was not as joyous and life affirming as Buddhism, and we Christians had some lessons to learn if it wished to be attractive to people today.

Over the years I've found that most Westerners who think they know something about Buddhism are actually profoundly ignorant about what Buddhism – as opposed sometimes to its cultural expressions (but the same could be said for any religion, and both believers and outside observers) – is really all about. And my suspicions that this was the case here were immediately confirmed when I saw the illustration for the article: an image of the “Laughing Buddha”, Budai (or Hotei, in Japanese). Now, you've all seen the picture, or sculpture, of Budai, the fat, smiling “Buddha” with his prayer beads and begging bowl, his robe open to reveal his big, round tummy, in old fashioned Chinese restaurants. But the truth is, he has about as much to do with traditional Buddhism as Santa Claus has to do with the nativity of Jesus. Although he is a cultural commonplace in Northern Asian Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism, he is actually a Chinese folk divinity, based on a monk who lived in China in the 9<sup>th</sup> century – thus 1600 years after Gautama, the Indian prince, the Buddha, who was so distressed at the suffering he saw in the world that he gave up his throne and engaged in meditation to find the true way to alleviate the suffering – and when he found it, shared it in the teaching of the Eightfold Path of renunciation, to eliminate the suffering we cause to others, and ourselves escape from this round of incarnations. (Unlike Budai, Gautama is often shown in early Buddhist art as severely emaciated during his long fasting while meditating.) Now, Budai is credited by the Chinese as being a reincarnation of Gautama, and thus is also, in that view, properly called a Buddha. But traditional Buddhism – the Buddhism of Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle) and the Pali Canon – is even less “life affirming” than Christianity, which at least teaches that the world was created good, and will return to that state. It is certainly a world away from the message of Budai, about the enjoyment of the simple life of renunciation – or at least the renunciation of everything but a good Chinese dinner. So, from the outset, her comparison was a bit apples and oranges.

She was quite right, however, about the image of Jesus as solemn, even

weeping. Perhaps the most famous verse in the Gospels – John 11:35 – pictures him weeping at the death of Lazarus: “Jesus wept.” It’s also the shortest verse in the Bible – which is why it is so well known. (Now, be honest with me: any of you who were in a catechism or confirmation class where you were required to learn a Bible verse by memory each week: didn’t you cheat just a bit one week by memorizing John 11:35?) But – though less memorably – Jesus is also recorded as weeping over the fate of Jerusalem.

Now, we do need to pause and realize that this picture is almost certainly a partial image. The gospels are not biographies; they are not attempts to picture the life and character of their subject. Their subject is God, and the Good News. They are theological documents: anything they tell us is there for some theological reason. They are not life stories. That should be obvious from what they do not tell us: what is said about his birth is there only to establish Davidic descent and divine intervention; after that, nothing is said about Jesus’ education and intellectual development. Thus there is no appraisal of Jesus’ character, as we would expect from a modern (or even ancient) biography. In the parables we do get hints that Jesus must have had a sense of humour, and though it was often a sharp humour, I can picture Jesus delivering some of the lines with a smile. And we are told about how he attends weddings and enjoys dinners as a guest: although there are relatives of the bride or groom who are party poopers who do get invited to weddings, I would imagine that Jesus was probably a welcome guest. But those things are not really of interest to the gospel writers. What they choose to include is there for a theological reason.

And what might that be? Well, thinking a little more about it, it occurred to me that the reason could be illustrated by a comparison with someone who also laughed – in the Old Testament. That is our foremother Sara. Now, we all know the outlines of the story: God promises her husband, Abram that, if he goes out from his homeland and follows in faith, he will be the father of mighty nation(s) in a land which God will give him. Although already aged, and childless, Abram does so. But after multiple adventures, the promise still seems to be no closer to fulfilment. Abram tries to force the issue by having a child by a concubine, Hagar – but that only complicates matters. Finally, one day, Abraham is sitting under his tent flap and looks up to see three visitors who have appeared out of nowhere. He invites them to eat with him, and while awaiting the meal one of the visitors says, “When I come back next year, you will have a son.” Abraham surely had his doubts about this, but as he was the host, he had to be polite about it and hide his thoughts. Sarah, who was inside the tent, where she could hear what was said but not be seen, outright laughs at the thought. The Visitor (and by this point in the story, it is obvious that it is a capital V Visitor!) however knows she laughed, and challenges it: “Is anything impossible for the Lord?”

But: Sarah laughed. Why? Because she was a realist. She knew she was, as

the Hebrew delicately puts it, “dried up”. She knew what the Visitor said was humanly impossible. It was absurd. So, she laughed at it.

Her response was the old human situation summed up by the British man of letters Horace Walpole, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when he wrote, “The world is a comedy for those that think, and a tragedy to them that feel.” Sara was among the thinkers: she knew this was absurd. So she laughed at the comedy – black comedy, if you will – of it.

But the gospels want us to know that Jesus was among those who felt – who felt compassion. This is not just an observation about the character of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. There is much more at stake here. Those who believe, as Christians do, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the incarnation of God in our midst, believe that Jesus was the Word, the fullest revelation of God. As such, Jesus reveals two things: the fullest truth about what human life should be like, and equally important, the clearest picture we have of what God is like. If we wish to see God, we need to see him in the face of Jesus. If we wish to know how God responds to things, we need to see how Jesus responds to things. How does He respond to illness when he sees it? ('You can cure me if you wish!' cried the leper; “I do,” responded Jesus: Mark 1:40ff)) How does he respond to physical hunger when he sees it? How does He respond to spiritual hunger when he encounters it? How does he himself respond to the bereavement of others? How does he respond to the loss of friends to death? How does he respond to the inevitable destruction and suffering that humans bring on themselves by their foolishness and sin, the inevitable tragedy of life? Over and over again we are shown the compassion of Jesus, as a way of revealing the compassion of our God. Yes, the Psalmist could write about God being 'merciful and gracious, for he knows our frame, and remembers that we are dust' (Psalm 103); in Jesus, God in our Midst, we see that in action.

That's why it is so important for the gospels to picture Jesus weeping. It is not to be negative about the world, but the only positive news we've got.

Heaven knows that we need it. Back in September even Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, admitted that the state of the world was causing him to doubt the existence of God. It's been a rough year. Israel and Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Mali, ebola in West Africa, thousands of aliens drowned in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe, and in Europe, Ukraine. But it seems to me that, with the possible exception of ebola, the Right Rev'd Mr. Welby might do better to doubt the reasonableness and good nature of mankind, than the existence of God. There is not a one of these things which is not the result of politics and economics, of human sin. OK, then, “Why doesn't God do something about it?” cry the atheists.

There are two simple answers to that. First, although the atheists wouldn't like the answer if they got it, is that we were created as responsible beings, with choice. We generally know what is right, and we generally know how to achieve that: for centuries it's all been there in the 10 Commandments, and the Eightfold Path, whatever. God could have made us robots, programmed, incapable of doing wrong. But that would be at the cost of the destruction of our humanity, of what makes us human, of our freedom – and most atheists, as humanists, would reject that. But the second answer is more important: God *is* doing something about it. No, God is not stepping in and pulling our chestnuts out of the fire, cleaning up our mess. That too is our responsibility. But God is responding with compassion, with mercy, with the promise of salvation, or reconciliation for those who repent and turn back from their sin and folly. In a sense this is a variation on the post-World War II question, where was God during the Holocaust – and the answer: in the camps. With the victims. Right where God has always been, since the blood of Abel cried out, and since God heard the groans of his people Israel in Egypt. But also as God has compassion on his people Israel when they do reach their promised land, and decide they want to be just like all the other peoples, and oppress others in turn: hear Hosea on that one: “How can I abandon you, O Israel?” (Hosea chapter 11). Even as Jesus wept for Jerusalem, God's compassion also extends to the perpetrators – for they are causing their own destruction too.

And therein lies our hope. Because Jesus wept, we can laugh – and laugh in joy, not in cynicism. Because Jesus revealed the compassionate face of God, we can look forward, we may believe that the impossible can happen, that there may be peace and reconciliation. Because Jesus revealed the compassionate face of God, we can hope. Because Jesus wept, we can find joy in life, as that comes – for we are surprised by joy, as C.S. Lewis said, even as we are surprised by grace, even in the midst of the darkness of personal distress and world events.

We can even dance. W.H. Auden, a poet who saw some pretty awful events in his lifetime, events summed up in his devastating poem “September 1, 1939”, also calls on us to

“Remember the gift, the one from the manger;

It means only this, you can dance with a stranger.”

Those lines become meaningful when we recognize the gift – the Christ child in the manger – as the Christ who wept in compassion, revealing the compassionate face of God, freeing us not merely to hope and joy, to dance – but to dance with the most unexpected of people, at the most unexpected places and times.

Jesus wept, and we are freed to dance – with the stranger, with the foreigner, with the refugee, with the illegal alien, with the out-processed asylum seeker. We are free to dance with the Muslim, with the Hindu, with the Buddhist, with

the atheist. We are free to dance with the old, and with the young. Despite our history, Black and White can dance together. We are free to dance with sexual minorities. We are free to dance with the poor – even as there are ever more of them joining the dance, and with the rich, who are invited to the dance too. We are free to dance, not just with our friends but particularly with our enemies. We are free to dance with those we have wronged, and more important, with those who have wronged us, when we have forgiven them: and we had best recognize that in the judgement and compassion of God, those who have wronged us and those we have wronged are almost always overlapping groups, for, as the English saying has it, 'It takes two to tango', and only rarely are the victims in personal matters not also to some degree perpetrators. Yes, there will always be some who will refuse to dance – refuse to dance with us, or refuse the gift of life and refuse to dance altogether. But let us not be among them. Jesus wept: so we could dance. Let us dance!