

The great cosmic joke is that you are what you are seeking. Despite all the religious and spiritual seeking on this planet, our searching always ends up back where we started. Now isn't that a good joke!!? We all look for happiness, peace and fulfilment in the things of the world, yet all along these things are our very nature – our very own centre of being. It's like looking everywhere for my car keys and then finding them in my trouser pocket!

Jesus is a great joke teller and raconteur – I picture him not as tall, handsome, bearded and bronzed, but rather as a Ronnie Corbett in an armchair (well ok then! Perhaps sitting on a boat or a grassy hillside), telling his stories.

The gospel is a joke because it involves the surprising and ironic inversion of the way we expect things to be, and because it tells a story in which order is brought from chaos – good through bad. And like a great joke, the gospel demands a response. It is conveyed to an audience, who either recognise it as good news, or reject it as offensive, foolish, or irrelevant. In other words, people either get it, or they don't. Coming to faith is not unlike getting a joke – or falling in love, for that matter. The gospel of Jesus Christ is surprising. It isn't what you'd expect, not at all. And some people just don't get it.

Getting it means changing, rooting out anti-God behaviour, seeking to serve others instead of self. It means giving with a smile on your face. It means happy gratefulness to God and not bitter resentment. It means seeking to enjoy God and glorify him forever. And it means “praying” — which if you don't get it, is a waste of time.

For the early Church, for those in whom the word of the kingdom initially took root and brought healing, peace, and joy, there was still a conundrum: why doesn't everyone who hears the word believe? Why is it that what is plain to us, is so imperceptible to others? Why, when we can say, “Jesus is Lord,” even at the risk of our lives, don't others get it? What's wrong here?

We may wonder some of the same things. Faith in Jesus is important to us. We go to church. Where is everyone else? Why are we the minority in our community, showing up, giving, serving, while all around us there are people who choose sports or coffee or sleep over what makes sense to us? Why are so many churches getting smaller or struggling? Is there something wrong with the word? Is the seed not what we thought it was? Are we wasting our time? Is there something else we should let take root in our hearts? Keeping soil good for planting can be hard work sometimes, and we want to know, is it worth it? Did the sower get it wrong?

Jesus's joke about The Sower could be a way to get us to do a little soil sampling of our hearts, a little analysis to see what kind of ground we are for seed-reception. It could be an invitation to ask ourselves, how can we make the soil of our hearts more fertile, ready to receive the seed that is the word of the kingdom?

Gardeners and farmers tell us that good soil has a lot of humus—decayed material like grass roots and leaves—that encourages good nutrients, good drainage and good aeration. Good soil has room for water and air to move through it and get to seed and plant roots. And although it seems like it's just an inert substance, good soil is full of life. For instance, earthworms burrow through soil, carrying away dead matter and taking needed material from the surface of the soil down deep where it can decompose and make more rich humus. In some places, good soil for planting exists because fire has burned off saplings, preventing forests from growing.

So good soil seems to be the result of letting some stuff go, die even, perhaps getting burned away and allowing room for life-promoting organisms to do their work. The same may be said of our hearts. We may need to let some old, false ideas go, die even, let idols go or have them taken from us may feel as painful as having them burned away, but letting them become compost may be the first step in making healthier soil. Letting in life-promoting, wholeness-producing understandings of Jesus and the true nature of God's reign can turn worthless clay into soil good for planting. We can be the good soil in which seeds take root and grow into healthy, seed-bearing grain. Who wouldn't want to be part of making God's bumper crop of growth and new life?

What are the aspects of our lives that tend to be so hard-packed that God cannot enter? Where are our blind spots? What spiritual necessities do we tend to avoid? What psychological encrustations keep us from opening up so the power of the spirit can transform us? How often are we apathetic about the cries of human need? In what “sounds of silence” do we hear but not listen? What mind tricks do we play to protect ourselves from risking intimacy? What can we do to soften our hard side and open ourselves to letting God motivate us for the sake of the gospel?

Let your imagination go; search for ways to apply the metaphorical examples. Think about ploughing and hoeing, for example. Loosening soil and exposing it to air might remind us to keep a fresh perspective and constantly expose ourselves to new ways of understanding what God has in mind for us in every situation.

Everyone loves a good joke. Well, almost everyone. There are some humourless people out there whom Jesus compares to soil so compacted by being walked on that the sown seed, the joke or the parable cannot penetrate the hard surface. Jokes, like parables, are really compacted mysteries. The truth of a joke or a mystery is all there in nugget form. If the listener can see into it or bite into it, he or she gets the point. Of course, that requires an openness to mystery, otherwise it just lands on the surface and has no effect. But **we** do more than laugh or gasp, if, in every joke or experience of wonder, we also make a resolution to live our lives better, more fully.

People who are humourless and for whom the mystery of life escapes them do not do this and so they reject the Gospel. It is not disrespectful to say in this context that the Gospel is God's favourite “joke,” to tell humankind. Parables in Jesus' day were really jokes and both alleviated the tedious burden of life and also taught truth. Those who missed his point because they were hard of heart, mentally and emotionally dense, were denied the fun, the mystery in life.

More often, after hearing a good joke and resolving to live more light-heartedly, the troubles of life re-enter and we go back to our pre-joke mood, as though we had never laughed or encountered the mystery of life. For, indeed, in a good joke, we encounter God. Jesus refers to this experience when he says his word takes “no root and lasts for only a time,” until some tribulation or persecution comes and the person falls away from the joy of life. And, of course, there are the thorns and entanglements of life robbing us of the time or the energy to resist the temptation to live life as usual, to return to the experience of life we had as children when we laughed and played and enjoyed the present moment.

It is ironic that if we are too serious about life and its responsibilities and troubles, we will never “*get*,” the kingdom of God, let alone get into it. We must become as children, complete with corny jokes, if we are to grasp the mystery of God found in daily living and ordinary experiences, but experiences in which we see the humour. Humour is a sense of proportion and perspective. When we see our small lives against the bigger picture, from the perspective of eternity, we can laugh at ourselves and our foibles, as well as others and enjoy. If we can do that, we can grasp the parables of Jesus and derive tremendous benefit from their wisdom and wit, making us likewise witty and wise.

As Isaiah memorably said: “So it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled, or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do.” We will be part of the action whether we like it or not. The joke is on us!!

If, on the other hand, we receive God’s word every day into our lives and try to live by it, we will be scattering the seed for generations yet to come.

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