The holy fool: Clowning in Christian ministry

Throughout history, clowning has played a significant role in the life of the Church and continues to be an effective witness. Within a context of biblical and historical models, humour can be a powerful means of ministry and an expression of relevant spirituality.

Olive Fleming Drane

Olive first became a clown minister in the mid-1980s, as a result of her discovery of God's love at a time of great personal tragedy in her own life – hence her clown name, Valentine, 'God's Love in Action'. Since then she has developed her calling in a unique way, empowering today's people to find spiritual direction, particularly in the context of authentic worship. For more information visit www.olivedrane.com

Clowning and ministry are not words that you usually find in the same sentence. But the two are not so far removed as you might imagine, and connecting clowning with ministry is certainly not just the latest gimmick for churches that want to be trendy.

Clowning in Jewish and Roman culture

The Church came to birth straddling two cultures, the Jewish and the Roman. The Old Testament is infused throughout with humour, and the prophets adopted clown-like behaviour in their lifestyles as well as their messages. They ate bugs (Mk 1.6) and hid under bushes (Jon 4.6–8), Isaiah walked around naked for three years (Isa 20.2–3), Jeremiah smashed pots (Jer 19.1–13) and wore a yoke on his neck (Jer 28.10–16), Hosea married a prostitute, Ezekiel cooked his food by burning his own excrement (Ezek 4.12), and he even ate a copy of the Bible (Ezek 3.1–3). It's hard not to agree with Mark Liebenow's observation that 'These are not normal people, not sensible like you and me.'[1] At a later period, clownish celebrations accompanied the feast of Tabernacles as 'pious men danced with torches in their hands and sang songs of joy and praise, while the Levites played all sorts of instruments. The dance drew crowds of spectators for whom grandstands had been erected. It did not end until the morning at a given sign, when water from the spring of Shiloh was poured over the altar' (*Mishna Sukka* IV.9).

Mimes and clowns were also significant in first-century Roman culture, and played a part in transcending language and cultural differences. Backed by rich patrons, they were the political commentators and newscasters of their day, offering exaggerated images of reality as a way of getting to the real issues, often by exposing the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of public life. The first Gentile Christians were at home in this rich theatrical context, and although Paul is conventionally characterised as a 'tentmaker', in other ancient texts the word *skēnopoios* invariably refers not to tents but to the construction of theatrical scenery and costumes.[2] When he recommended foolishness over wisdom, he may well have been doing so from personal experience – and his readers would almost certainly have seen it as an allusion to the public clowns who turned everyone's expectations upside down in their passion for the truth (1 Cor 1.18–25; 4.10).

Jesus the holy fool

Some readers will be surprised to find Jesus mentioned in this context but, in conscious continuity with the prophets, he regularly used techniques that are typical of serious clowning, poking fun at people who took themselves too seriously and wondering what the world might be like if things were different, if the rules worked some other way. And so the first become last (Mk 9.35), the blind lead the blind (Lk 6.39), and a yoke turns into a symbol of freedom (Mt 11.29) – not to mention people with planks in their eyes (Mt 7.1–5) and camels squeezing through the eyes of needles (Mk 10.25). This is classic clowning, something that Douglas Adams believes the evangelists also reflect in the way they depict Jesus, juxtaposing completely different worlds alongside each other.[3] Throughout

their narratives there are unexpected outcomes when compared to conventional 'wisdom': the Messiah is born in a stable not a palace, and is crucified rather than worshipped. Even his genealogy is a joke: Matthew wanted his readers to accept Jesus as the Son of God, yet the list of his forebears turns out to be a collection of prostitutes, murderers and criminals (Mt 1.1–17)! Serious theological discussions invariably have comic elements, with Peter usually playing the straight guy who asks all the questions that the others want to ask, but don't know how – and then the responses being completely incongruous as the Son of God and Messiah turns out to be the exact opposite of the powerful and all-conquering figure he was supposed to be. The Passion story itself has the same tragi-comic character, as Pilate asks him about truth, and he is led to the cross dressed like a king, where a placard says he is one, even though he isn't – and then the prime witnesses of his resurrection are all women, the one group whom nobody in the ancient world would

dressed in the deacon's habit and made preparations for the sacrifice, but was stopped in his tracks by a vision in which he saw Jesus. No one else saw it, so when he announced that he was a Christian and could not offer the sacrifice, they were not surprised: they all thought he was the deacon anyway, and that was exactly what they expected. But then Philemon unmasked himself and no one knew what to do, because (now as himself, and not in character) he still refused to sacrifice and he was thought to be joking, ridiculing Christian faith and practice. However, when the authorities realised no inducement could change Philemon's mind and that he was adamant in his faith, he was put to death (along with the deacon), on the orders of the emperor. His final words reminded the crowd of his theatrical background and his previous willingness to ridicule Christian faith: 'You laughed at those comic blows then, but the angels wept. Now, then, it is only fair that your tears should not weigh against the joy which the angels feel at my salvation.'[5]

An incarnational ministry

Though using mime skills, individuals like Philemon are better understood as examples of clowns – and the two art forms are in any case closely related, both of them representing exaggerated ways of reflecting and commenting on life. But while mime generally serves to challenge, clowning combines challenge and salvation by confronting people with the reality of themselves, but then lifting them up and offering a more hopeful way of being – and doing it all with fun and humour. A mime can be detached from the situation but the clown cannot help but be involved, addressing issues through laughter and in a spirit of personal openness and vulnerability. It is this particular facet that is the distinctive hallmark of the Christian clown as an expression of incarnational ministry. In clown-speak this might be described as the clown taking the custard pie! The mime tends to present a minimalist message, while clowning offers a bigger picture, using colour and broad brushstrokes (literally as well as metaphorically) in ways that open up spaces for people's own imaginations to find solutions to their predicament and encounter God in redemptive ways.

> ## humour can be a particularly powerful expression of a relevant spirituality for today

NOTES

1. Mark Liebenow, *Is there Fun after Paul? A Theology of Clowning* (San Jose: Resource Publications, 1987), p. 24.

2. The *BDAG Greek-English Lexicon* gives two meaning for *skēnopoios*: (i) 'tentmaker', or (ii) 'stage hand' or 'scene maker', and concludes that contemporaries of Paul would understand *skēnopoios* in the sense most used in the urban area, i.e. relating to theatrical productions.

3. Douglas E Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

4. Elizabeth-Anne Stewart, *Jesus the Holy Fool* (Franklin: Sheed & Ward, 1999), p. 13.

5. For the accounts of this, see Bollandus, *Acta Sanctorum* (Paris & Rome, 1856), March vii.751–54; and

be likely to believe. To describe all this as 'tales of the unexpected' is simply to highlight the obvious. Elizabeth-Anne Stewart comments: 'The study of Jesus the Holy Fool explores a Christology which has been largely neglected – or more precisely, avoided … One has to wonder whether the prospect of highlighting the "absurdity" of Jesus was simply too much for those who preferred to venerate Jesus as "Christ the King"; after all, the regality of this Jesus reflects on his subjects, as surely as does the absurdity of a foolish Christ and, given a choice, most would choose to be followers of an imperial Jesus'.[4]

Challenging the system

In making this connection, the portrayal of Jesus as clown reflects some key aspects of life in the early Christian centuries. Roman mimes regularly parodied the deities, and Christian beliefs and practices were a natural source of material. Things like baptism and Eucharist, not to mention arguments about doctrinal niceties, could seem bizarre to other people and it was not difficult for mimes to poke fun at them. But Christian mimes were also uniquely placed to challenge the system. Some of the most significant prophetic challenges to Diocletian's policy of marginalising Christians came not from preachers but from mimes. In AD 287, at Antinoe in Egypt, the local prefect, Arianus, declared that all visitors must sacrifice to the local gods, or be put to death. This was only a problem for Christians, so when a weak-willed deacon arrived there he knew what the consequences would be if he followed his conscience. In an effort to avoid having to make a personal decision, he hired Philemon, a famous mime artist and entertainer, to do it for him. Philemon

Properly understood, and placed within a context of biblical and historical models, humour can be a particularly powerful expression of a relevant spirituality for today. The clown is often known as 'the truth teller', but it is truth in the guise of story and creative interaction, which is why it has the power to reinvigorate both celebration and witness in a postmodern culture that prefers what is visual, tactile and emotive over against what is propositional and detached. Clowning meets the criteria that are essential to any effective sharing of faith in today's world: it is both human and humane, in every sense of those words; it is biblical, with a profound spiritual message; it is traditional in that it relates to ancient church practices; and it is open-ended, allowing space

for people to respond for themselves, in their own time and place, to the gospel. Far from being some trendy gimmick, clown ministry offers an authentic continuity with some key theological principles that are deeply rooted in the Bible and the wider Christian tradition. Edward Hays is right when he notes that 'You and I are invited to be fools, followers of the Great Fool, the Clown Christ.'[6] But this is no easy ride in either ministry or mission, and Paul's invitation to be a 'fool for Christ's sake' (1 Cor 4.10) is not a soft option but a call to costly discipleship. This is not cheap grace but costly grace[7] — an invitation to share in the sufferings of Christ himself (Col 1.24), which is also an invitation to experience new life (Phil 3.10–11), something that was the most unexpected twist of all in the turning of the tables that we call the resurrection.

Christian clown ministry is continuous with the tradition of the holy fools who have played a significant part in the life of the Christian community from the beginning, and whose ultimate model is Jesus. Throughout the early centuries and into the Middle Ages, holy fools played a significant role in Church life, doing exactly the same as the Old Testament prophets and indeed Jesus himself, by highlighting inconsistencies and hypocrisies in institutional life. On All Fools' Day, they were legitimately allowed to poke fun at their superiors, and they only disappeared as an approved office when they were deemed to have overstepped the mark in doing so. The last holy fool was canonised in the seventeenth century, a period which coincided with the age of reason and Enlightenment and the insistence that the most faithful communication of the gospel would be through ideas and theories. Today we are living in a vastly different cultural environment, and clowning (along with other art forms) speaks in fresh ways to a postmodern generation. I became involved in Christian clown ministry as a consequence of my own discovery of a God who heals at a time of particular crisis in my life, and found myself introduced into a whole new way of looking at things — through the cross of the Holy Fool, literally opening my eyes to see the world the way God sees it, through that tragic-comic series of events which form the heart of the Easter story.[8]

If we are to be effective witnesses for Christ today, we need to find vehicles that will allow us to be real about ourselves. Humour is one way of doing that, especially when we are enabled to laugh at ourselves, for by doing so we accept the fact that we are part-hero and part-fool, part-success and part-failure. Good clowning sets these two worlds against each other, and in the process offers a new way through which we can see the deeper significance of what is real and meaningful. It gives a sense of balance between success and failure, and thereby offers the possibility of a starting point for renewal. In my clowning I sometimes think I have a role like the cleaner — a bit like John the Baptist, clearing away the debris and creating spaces where the Clown Redeemer can step in to transform situations and

people. The role of the clown is to identify where God is at work and come alongside, to introduce others to that place and then step aside so that God can work.

Clowning can be transformational for individuals, but it can also be a way of dealing with apparent powerlessness for whole societies: 'During the final days of communist government in Poland in the late 1980s, thousands of people took to the streets of Warsaw every night — dressed as clowns. They were well aware of the possibility of a violent crackdown on their activities, so they did nothing that could reasonably be interpreted as political provocation. There were no speeches or political rallies, for that would only have invoked the kind of backlash they sought to avoid. All they did was walk about the streets dressed as clowns for two or three hours each night, before returning to their homes. The use of such festivity as a form of social protest can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages, and for the Polish protesters it was

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a powerful way of dealing with their own internal oppression, while at the same time highlighting the weakness of the communist regime. For what kind of government could possibly be intimidated by a crowd of people dressed in funny clothes? How could anyone justify arresting, or even opposing, such people? Yet their continued presence, highlighting the absurdity of a political system that was indeed unsettled by such behaviour, was one of the most powerful of all expressions of public opposition at that time and, together with other factors, played its part in securing the downfall of communism not only there but throughout the east of Europe.'[9]

So clowning is more than just dressing up in funny clothes and learning a few tricks or telling some jokes. A lot more. For Christian clowns, the key question is whether they point to Jesus rather than drawing attention to themselves. And whether they create a space in which people can face their own failures and inconsistencies knowing that there is also the offer of redemption and new life. All of which makes it sound remarkably traditional.

online at http://acta.chadwyck.co.uk/. See also Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1931), pp. 17–18.

6. Edward Hays, *Holy Fools and Mad Hatters* (Leavenworth: Forest of Peace Books, 1993), p. 24.

7. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press 1959).

8. Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF, 2002).

9. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 1.