

# Charlie's Amusing X-ray

*John 20. 1-18*

A Witness by Ian Pearson, Easter Day - 24 April, 2011

This witness seeks to draw on the Easter Day tradition of including a little humor in the celebration. A child's doll and its 'school books' and medical x-ray were used as props for the beginning of this witness

Meet Charlie. If you think he's good looking, socially ahead of his peers and way above average in intelligence, that's because he's my grand doll.

If you doubt his intelligence I can offer the witness of his Social Studies book from first year high school. He was placed, of course, in class 1A. The first page begins 'The Anzacs fought in Gallipoli fifty one years ago...' which reveals something of his age. At the foot of the page in a child-teacher's neat pen are the words 'Very Good' beside which is a single tick of praise.

Over the page is a double spread map of Australian states bordered by blue seas and oceans, each of which is tidily named. Another 'teacher's' tick and the score of '20 out of 20' no less indicates Charlie's teacher's further approval in red pen. She was obviously not Tasmanian, though, because that state is missing entirely from the page. A little further on we find in Charlie's immaculate hand 'Environment means your surroundings.... Natural environment means untouched by man. Cultural environment means man made. My environment is Eastwood.'

While Charlie was an unreconstructed male chauvinist in his use of language - as we pretty much all were in 1966 - he has since reformed. (Erect doll sized rainbow umbrella) I suspect it is a consequence of his sensitivity to the experience of minority having since come out as gay!

The skeleton in our family cupboard is that Charlie has felt estranged from Helen, his bought-mother, ever since she discovered me in 1975. Families can be such cruel places.

Charlie's stepmother - our first daughter Janette - has lived all her life in the long shadow of cystic fibrosis which shapes her daily living and will one day claim her life. On occasions, Charlie has provided Janette with considerable emotional support. Bravely showing her the way one day, Charlie accompanied his 3 year old stepmother to a fearful x-ray experience, submitting himself to the radiologist in an attempt to model his own survival of the procedure. (Charlie's x-ray is flourished) Unlike Janette on that occasion, he displays no sign of pneumonia. His chest is clear... as a void. His neck and shoulders and hips, on the other hand, show atypical annular jointing which explains some of his unusual physical characteristics. (Twist neck 360 degrees)

\*

Most people with a debilitating disease know the value of that defiant brand of humor which laughs full in the face of a reality which is grim. Even hospital intensive care nurseries have their slow days. We experienced some of those during Janette's first two months of life inside a Perspex humidicrib. One slow day two nurses swaddled a baby-sized doll, hooked it up to a drip pole and placed her inside a vacant humidicrib. 'Doctor,' they said. 'We've got a new admission. Will you look her over?' They described some bogus malady I no longer recall. He passed the test. One look at her unmoving chest and the doctor quietly and professionally exclaimed: 'She's got no respiration!' At which the nurses could no longer contain their conspiratorial mirth.

One nurse, though nearby, could not take part in the shenanigans. He was rostered to give his undivided attention to the smallest human being I have ever seen. Monica had been born at only 26 weeks of gestation. She fitted, fully stretched out, inside the span of my small hand. Her eye lids had not been formed when we first met her. Her lungs were immature. And when they withdrew her respirator to reduce the chance of future blindness, she periodically forgot to breathe. So a one-to-one nurse monitored her minute by minute around the clock to bang on the side of her humidicrib or reach in to give her a mild physical stimulus to remind her to breathe. Monica was her name. So she inevitably attracted the nickname Mozzie. Mozzie by name. Mozzie by size.

Staff and residents of intensive care and other hospital trauma wards know the value of that defiant brand of humor which laughs full in the face of a reality which is grim. It is a taming of the spectre of death, a bolster to our heart-felt hopes. 'Death! Where's your sting? Grave! Where's your victory?' apostle Paul taunts in 1 Corinthians 15 - his crowning and defiant chapter of hope in the face of death expressed as images of resurrection. 1 Cor 15. 54

It is not a physical resurrection of Jesus Paul talks about because Paul claims to have seen him long after the Gospel tellers have Jesus ascended from Earth. Either that, or the gospel tellers' stories have the character of parable about them rather than a literal physical truth. It doesn't matter either way really because we know of resurrection intimately, and independently of the stories of Jesus, in the death-to-life moments of our own experience.

Gallows humor expresses defiant hope in the face of death. Oscar Wilde was destitute and living in a cheap boarding house when he found himself on his deathbed. There are various reports of what his last words were exactly, one of which is 'My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death; one or the other of us has got to go!' I think he must have died in the same hovel Helen and I rented in London for a year. After a few months of red and yellow tartan on one wall, orange and lemon floral on another and an indescribable third wall, we wanted to check out as well.

Thomas More is reported as having said to his hangman 'Help me up to the scaffold would you. But let me come down by myself.'

I once heard a woman on radio reveal that Sydney University Medical School had more bodies bequeathed to them than they could use. 'How about bequeathing your body to a Malaysian medical school,' the morgue official suggested. 'Perfect!' she exclaimed. 'I always wanted to travel!'

Resurrection is the early church's last laugh at the religious and Roman authorities. Even death cannot suppress the Spirit of Jesus they claimed.

There is so much that is ironic - even humorous - about the Christian story. But we are so used to being reverent that we often fail to see the comedy, especially in the Passion and Resurrection stories of Jesus. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* captures this defiant humour though, in the scene of another execution as the crucified ones sing 'Always look on the bright side of life!'

Comedy can powerfully effect Social and spiritual change, perhaps even more deeply than tragedy. At dinner with South African black activist Alan Boesak he retailed the value of humor in the struggle against Apartheid. Since there were always government informers at their anti-apartheid meetings the first task of the conveners was to identify them in a back corner and invite them up to the front row. 'Come up here,' he and Desmond Tutu would taunt. 'You don't have to hide down there. Come up the front! Be our guest! You can hear much better up here!'

Humor empowered their black audience in the face of threatened brutality. And prevented the lynching of the government informers at the very same time. Humor in the face of painful realities is one reason that South Africa has not erupted - not yet at least - into civil war.

We find ourselves sometimes focusing on images of horror, snapshots of pain. News media encourage our fears. We find ourselves recoiling at the inhumanity of oppressors the atrocities they inflict upon the oppressed. We journey into the fear of darkness. With comedy there is still the presence of horror but we are able, sometimes, to laugh. Sometimes in spite of it. Sometimes because of it. And in those moments life smells a little like resurrection.

'Laughter,' writes Harvey Cox,<sup>1</sup> 'is hope's last weapon... our only remaining defence.' Where laughter is real it is a voice of faith. 'In the presence of disaster and death, we laugh instead of crossing ourselves,' writes Cox, 'or, perhaps better stated, our laughter is our way of crossing ourselves.'<sup>2</sup>

Laughter brings relief. Betrayal, bitter disappointment, torture and death are not the final realities after all. The worst that could happen has happened and yet all is well. And all will be well.

Through Jesus' self-offering, we have also been made aware of how intricately and intimately God is immersed in the circumstances of our lives, suffering with us, grieving for us, holding nothing back in terms of love, forgiveness and mercy.

Never again do we need to fear being abandoned. Never again do we have to dread being alone in our anguish. God is a faithful God, a motherly God, a compassionate God. So we, too, can find release in holy laughter.

\*

Did you hear what happened when the composer of the Hokey Pokey song died? They had a terrible time getting him into his coffin. They put his left leg in he put his left leg out. They put his right leg in, he put his right leg...

Something in us all needs the last laugh in the face of the daily prospect of death. So we journey these living days in the hope-hued light of resurrection.

Amen.

---

#### **Footnotes:**

1. Harvey Cox, *A Feast of Fools*, 1969 p157
2. Ibid.

#### **Works Consulted:**

Elizabeth-Anne Stewart, *Jesus the Holy Fool*, 1999