

I shall take as my text this evening the line of Holy Scripture from the seventh verse of the sixth chapter of the epistle of Paul to the Galatians, set by the Book of Common Prayer as the sentence to be read at Matins and Evensong on this solemnity of Charles, King and Martyr-

‘God is not mocked’

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.

When I was at school, I had an English teacher with the most unbearable habit. He would laugh during Shakespeare plays. Mine was a remarkably tolerant alma mater, prepared to overlook public drunkenness, enthusiasm for corporal punishment, and dubious standards of literacy amongst its staff but this, it was widely acknowledged, was a faux pas too far. When I say that he laughed during Shakespeare plays, I do not mean that he gave a little giggle during the genuinely amusing parts of *Twelfth Night* nor that some piece of innovative directorial business raised a chuckle during *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. No- he would laugh loud and long during pieces of seemingly interminable dialogue in plays like *Macbeth* with one purpose and one purpose alone- to show that he understood the joke. Few things elicited more joy in our English class than when this show of intellectual superiority came a cropper during a production of the Scottish play. Sir had already started laughing when the Porter fluffed his lines, leaving him chuckling into an empty space where a lame Jacobean joke ought to have been. Of course, afterwards, he had to explain to a bus load of school boys what the joke was meant to have been- an explanation met with yet another awkward silence.

It is said that explaining a joke is a bit like dissecting a frog- you may learn how it works but, unavoidably, the frog is killed in the process. I tend to agree, but, when faced with a consideration of what it means to mock, or not mock God himself, a certain degree of theory, not to say theology, is required. Thomas Hobbes, tutor to the son of the martyr king whilst he was in exile, came up with the following definition of laughter: ‘laughter’ he wrote ‘is nothing else but some sudden glory arising from some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others or of our own infirmity formerly’. Two things about this definition strike me as being especially pertinent to the Christian faith, and, in particular to the example of that faith as lived out by his late majesty King Charles I.

First and foremost Hobbes makes clear that there is, inbuilt to the mechanism of humour, an admission of infirmity. Herein lies the very first and foremost reason why it is impossible to mock God- for by His very nature there is no comparative infirmity at which we might turn our laughter. Of course, there have been plenty who have thought themselves capable of doing so- the tropes of the parable of the husbandmen echo across the centuries but, despite there being periods where it appeared, to our scale-covered human eyes that God had been mocked, invariably, the Divine purposes, the true workings of God will out. Indeed an acknowledgement of that is necessary before we might approach God- we will come to confess our sins in a matter of moments before we are able to take His holy sacrament to our comfort, and to do otherwise, as the exhortation in the Prayer Book makes clear, risks our own destruction. A knowledge of our infirmity as a Christian is not, however a fearful or hateful admission- quite the opposite. In fact it is liberation itself, it is the ultimate statement of the absolute power of God, a statement as much about the Divine nature as it is about our own. Take the example of his late majesty- before his execution he made his confession of his own infirmities and on the scaffold itself he confessed, despite the manifest injustice of the situation, that God was just, even praying for those who had so contrived injustice to place him where he was. He knew, he confessed, we know, we must confess that the true infirmity is in us, in mankind, and that the true eminence is

to be found in God. In short, the only possible cosmological mockery that might occur is not by man of God, but vice versa. God is not mocked, God mocks.

Yet, God is not a capricious or cruel God in his mocking, as the pagans in their error conceived their vile and unattractive Pantheon to be. This is the God who, in the person of Jesus Christ gave his back unto the smiters, who allowed himself to be crowned with thorns and paraded (we would, at this juncture, do well to recall that the first people to dress Christ up in the robes of a political office or- we might say- the colours of a particular political party, did so to denigrate him- so do those who claim him for manifestations of putrid democracy today). This too is the God who grows his Church through the blood of the saints and martyrs, who granted Blessed Charles the chance to go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown. God mocks, but his mockery is to turn upside down the mockery that we so often afflict on his own anointed. This is the mockery that shows truth and love to an oh so often deceitful and hateful world. Who else was it but a Roman soldier who recognised Christ's divinity when the temple curtain was rent in twain- *that*, not the spitting and smiting, is the true mockery of false claims to imperial power. And, as we recall the example of blessed Charles, think how sure those Puritans were that they were ushering in a godly republic, only for murder, anarchy and evil to overtake them, resulting in restoration of Church and State- *that*, not the false trial that the Lord's anointed endured, is the true mockery of puritanical legalism. Think too of today. Of those- be it in the academy or in the political sphere- who, with breezy confidence defame and decry Christianity, the sovereignty of God, the faith of the Church - who either view the faith as something to sneer at or, more worryingly, seek to erase it entirely, with a totalitarian neo-ethic. Be assured my friends, they too will find their purposes and devices mocked in due time. God is not mocked- God mocks us.

Alongside necessary admission of human infirmity there is, at the heart of laughter as Hobbes conceives of it, a realization of glory- and what else, my friends, is the Christian faith but this very hope? If the true definition of glory itself- not just the vain shadow of glory we see here on earth but the very font of gloriousness that has no equal- if this glory is what we proclaim it to be, namely to stand in the presence of the living God, then, again, it is not possible for God to be mocked. Indeed the opposite is necessary- for the entirety of glory is invested in Him. What else is the *risus paschalis*, the Easter laughter, such a vibrant feature of the writing and preaching of fathers such as Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa, but the punchline of the greatest mockery ever completed- the mockery, by the glory of the resurrection of death itself, the mockery of Satan's power by the harrowing of Hell, the mockery of this world and its ways by the opening wide of the gates of Heaven and marking out of the route to true glory itself. Again, this is a sign of God's gentle mockery of the world- this is not a sudden realization of glory from which we are excluded. Quite the opposite, it is our created purpose to become a part of that Easter laughter, to join God in the place for which we were made- that is to say in glory. There can be no scenario more fitting of Hobbes's description of laughter- what joy must echo round the heavens as the saints realise their past infirmity, when they, the true husbandmen render their fruits now that the season is due. What joy when they know their eminence by their imminence to that very font of glory itself. What joy, on this day in particular, must there have been, must there still be, in the realisation that the martyr-king's hope was not in vain and that an incorruptible crown did await him- what a moment of 'sudden glory'.

It is easy to declare this to be true here, in this epicentre of orthodoxy where the incense mingles with the words of Cranmer's glorious liturgy all inexorably bound on the journey Heavenwards. But what of the public sphere? What then is the Christian to do? How do we live as if we truly believe that God is not mocked. Well, to return to our dead frog, it is to live as if we already

know the punchline. It is to live as if we know full well the infirmity of our present situation and the sudden glory that is to come after it. Such a life is undoubtedly counter the prevailing culture- it would appear that the West has this the wrong way round- a mistaken idolatry that affords the ways of the world, the petty priorities and priggeries of humanity the status of glory, affirming the empty platitudes round which secular identity is centred, whilst all the while the pathological fear of infirmity, of weakness, and in particular that weakness that comes with death lurks, incubus like ready to inexorably crash down upon each and every one of us. Such a situation, such a world view is hardly a tenable one, especially as the years march on, but then, as I say, God is not mocked.

The task of the Christian in such a world as this is then to live as if they have the laughter of the *risus paschalis* echoing in their ears. To live bound up in the cosmological topsy-turviness of the Resurrection. For it is that event that changes everything- that makes the farcical of those things we take too seriously here on earth plain and the seriousness of those things we all too often denigrate here on earth crystal clear as well. It is the Resurrection that ties us to those, be it on a cold and cruel scaffold at Westminster 370 years ago or in the dark dust of the desert today, who die for their faith in the knowledge that incorruptible crowns await them. It is by the Resurrection that God has mocked the evils and the false sureties of past ages and will, in time, come to do exactly the same to the ridiculousness of our own age. We are called to proclaim that we have hope in 'some sudden glory' and not in our earthly infirmities, to proclaim that we are in on the joke, and to laugh the laughter of the saints.

Let us return to the martyr king, and to the parable of the husbandmen- what those who contrived to kill his late majesty and the husbandmen have in common, what they have too, in common with the culture of today is pride. Pride is what encourages us to take ourselves seriously. Pride is what bars us from confessing the infirmities that separate us from joining in the heavenly joy. Pride is what causes us to look for glory in the dust of earthly things rather than to the heavenly source of glory itself. What then is the antidote to pride? Mockery, laughter. God is not mocked, but when we overstretch ourselves with our vain pomp, be assured that God will mock us as His purposes are worked out. The Fall occurred by humanity taking God too lightly and ourselves too seriously- the resurrection, that glorious resurrection into which blessed Charles entered by a blaze of glory on the scaffold and, in due time, you and I might hope to enter too, is God mocking that self-centred seriousness and rebuking our attempts to diminish or mock God. That Resurrection turns what we assume about the powers of earth, the trajectory of history, the powers of Hell, and the inevitability of death on its head.

God is not mocked, but by the Resurrection God mocks Satan, God mocks death, and God mocks us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.