

12th January 2025

Laughter

“Mirth is God’s medicine. Everyone ought to bathe in it.”

Henry Ward Beecher *Royal Truths*

Steve Allen was an American TV and radio personality, comedian, musician, writer and actor. In 1954, he achieved national fame as the co-creator and first host of *The Tonight Show*, on which many subsequent late-night TV talk-shows were modelled. Reflecting on the importance of humour, he wrote this in *Funny People* in 1981.

Without laughter life on our planet would be intolerable. So important is laughter to us that humanity highly rewards members of one of the most unusual professions on earth, those who make a living by inducing laughter in others. This is very strange if you stop to think of it: that otherwise sane and responsible citizens should devote their professional energies to causing others to make sharp, explosive barking-like exhalations.

Henry Ward Beecher was right when he said, “mirth is God’s medicine”. So let’s give thanks for the gift of laughter that helps make sense of what would otherwise remain a forbidding and humourless existence.

This is the time of year when I’m invited to give a talk here and there, to a church Guild, Rotary Club, Community Group, or the like. It’s been familiar territory for me for years, as I’ve reflected on inner-city ministry, the Iona Community, Marie Curie, end-of-life care, Hospice Chaplaincy and bereavement issues. There can be humour in all of these areas of life – yes, including end-of-life care – but it’s mostly serious. So, recently, I’ve been offering a different kind of talk, drawing on the strange, often unbelievable events of ministry, and “telling it as it is”. It’s a kind of “behind the scenes” talk, “a funny thing happened to me on the way to ...” a series of anecdotes and reminiscences – and bizarre ones too. And the funnier I can make this incident or that, the better it’s received.

I have a couple of talks coming up and I’ll enjoy telling my stories. But most of all, I’ll delight in hearing people laugh. I don’t get paid for it. I’m not a professional entertainer. But if I can induce laughter in others, then it’s a healing medicine for me too. Robert Burns wrote in *Tam o’ Shanter*, “The landlord’s laugh was ready chorus.” That’s the response I look for in my talks, and I’m delighted when others join that happy chorus.

A prayer for today

Lord, thank you for the medicine of mirth – healing and life-enhancing. Amen

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