

Oh yes you did
Genesis 18:12-15

In a world full of terrorism, tragedies and turmoils it is good to find cause for a laugh. Sometimes it is hard not to laugh out loud at inappropriate moments, I remember having great difficulty controlling myself when standing next to two ladies who were passing Elizabeth Frink's statue of the Virgin Mary at Salisbury Cathedral. One said to the other: 'It doesn't look a bit like Queen Victoria, does it?'

There are times when a particular translation of the Bible stands head and shoulders above the others for somehow hitting the nail on the head. I want to take you to the Old Testament reading today. There it says: "Sarah said 'I did not laugh', lying because she was afraid, But he replied, 'Oh yes you did.'" Now to my sense of humour, that demands the continuation "Oh no I didn't" - and so on. Now I am not saying that the original writer of Genesis was brought up in the Punch and Judy and pantomime tradition in which that particular form of banter was normal - but it fits so absolutely, it must be the best translation.

It is laughter in general, and Sarah's laughter in particular that I want to think about, People don't change, of course, and people laughed in Old Testament times just as we do today, and for the same reasons. And there is plenty of evidence of that in the Bible – from the little boys who laugh at Elisha and call him "Bald-head" to the more subtle humour of plays on words that are a frequent feature of the Old Testament. Jesus told funny stories, although we tend to read them with such solemnity that any laughter seems impossible - think of the story of the man with a plank in his eye, for example. So because people don't change, the ordinary human activity we call laughter hasn't changed either. And people can laugh either *at* or *with*. Something can be a laugh, or it can be laughable. The story we are concerned with starts out with one kind of laughter, and ends up with another. Sarah overhears the curious conversation between her husband and these three strangers whom they have been putting up overnight. The sheer picture of her lurking at the tent flap seeing what she can overhear is quite funny in itself. They (or is it he - the text fluctuates between singular and plural, and has given some commentators cause to speculate rather pointlessly about the Trinity in the Old Testament). Anyway, he or they tell Abraham that she is going to have a son. That being, as she sees it, a physical impossibility, being post-menopausal, she laughs to herself. 'It's funny really, what people say'. And of course Sarah was not alone in laughing. In the previous chapter we have an account of how Abraham was told that Sarah would have a child at the age of ninety. And he bows low to God, and whilst in the middle of bowing has his own private giggle at what is clearly up the spout. But, the last laugh is God's, because she *does* have a child. And they come to share in God's laughter, because they call the child Yitzak – which we have Anglicised as Isaac. And it means something to do with laughter - probably "One laughs", although some have argued it could literally mean "God laughs". But certainly Isaac is a child of laughter – the joy of God's purpose and promise. Sarah is quoted as saying 'God has brought me laughter.'

The question is, why did Sarah deny she laughed, when she is challenged about it? Being laughed *at* is not a very happy experience, as we all know to our cost from childhood. So it is natural that she doesn't readily admit to it. Fear of expressing what we really think to God is very common. "I didn't like to say" - that is the kind of thing which indicates a lack of trust that the person can take being laughed at. But the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac tells us that we can share with God when we want to laugh at him, and that the reaction is not anger, or criticism, but a sharing of the joke - Oh yes you did - and an acceptance that what seems humanly impossible is fair game for laughter.

Martin Luther was a witty man, although some of his wit might not have pleased the likes of Mary Whitehouse, it has to be said. And he was very down-to-earth about laughter in heaven. He said "If you're not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there." And that seems to me fair comment for myself. The programmes I enjoy most on TV are probably the classic comedies. It is good to laugh, and the thought that it might not happen in heaven is devastating, And that leads us on to one of those questions which are unanswerable, but important nonetheless - and that is "Does God have a sense of humour?". I once put together a meditation for a service under the title "Is God called Bog?" The answer is of course Yes - that is his name in Russian. And that must be a source of divine humour. If we believe we are made in the image and likeness of God, then surely that includes the universal human gift of laughter. And if God is a God with a smile, then that explains a great deal. If we have any degree of sanity, we can laugh at ourselves and one day we are going to have an uproarious time laughing at the silly things we have done in the name of religion over the centuries. We laugh now at the medievals' concern about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Some day we are going to laugh about the things that *we* take so seriously. That is likely to be a very healing thing. When I have asked couples getting married what helps them get over their less good moments with each other, quite often they will say – we can laugh at ourselves. A smile indicates we have got a sense of perspective.

In the meantime, it seems a good idea to take the advice of the c.17th puritan divine Richard Baxter. It may sound strange coming from a Puritan, but he advised: "'Keep company with the more cheerful sort of the Godly; there is no mirth like the mirth of believers.'" St Teresa of Avila said the same thing from the other side of the coin – 'From sour faced saints, good Lord deliver us.' There are an extraordinary large number of serious Christians - indeed in the mid-nineteenth century that word was used as the best possible description of a Christian - a real devout and truly religious person would be said to be *serious*. Thank God we are getting some humour back into church life. If God has a sense of humour, we can't take religion seriously without taking that sense of humour seriously. And today's story of God entering into a Punch and Judy dialogue with Sarah sums it up splendidly. Of course you could argue that that is just the way of the translation, and that God didn't make a joke of it. There is only one reply to that - "Oh yes he did" - and we have scriptural warrant to support it.

Sarah said ' God has brought me laughter.' I wonder how we might echo that? If our faith is a reflection of the miraculous love of God which we have found in Jesus, then it ought to be a faith which can be

expressed in smiles and laughter. Sharing that is a gift the world needs. In what is probably the most famous passage in the book Ecclesiastes, the preacher says 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. Amongst the many pairings starting with 'a time to be born and a time to die' he says 'a time to weep and a time to laugh'. In a troubled world we find plenty of causes to weep. But we are not making light of those if, knowing the love of God, we also find there is a time to laugh. Authentic Christian living needs both.