

Send in the clowns: Satire and protest

Isaiah 50:4-9 (NIV) Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV) Luke 19:28-40 J Shannon

Don't think for a moment that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem wasn't designed to be provocative. The greatest weapon in our arsenal is mockery.

We know that generals and high Roman officials always paraded into town on white horses with people running before them spreading carpets of flowers and carrying fancy standards – banners of bright colours. They had ushers to push street stalls and pedestrians out of the way. And don't forget the trumpets, if there were some to be had which were usually met with glum silence – as an oppressed people tried to ignore warriors as they went by. Jesus' entry was sheer theatre and buffoonery.

The “triumphal Entry” is always in parenthesis for a reason...

...not a white horse but a humble, young donkey; no trumpets but people shouting “Hosanna!” – “Save Us!”. The crowds, the joy, the attention was offensive to the rulers. No flowers but people willing to sacrifice their clothing to soften the tread of their king – and how the Romans hated kings.

Yes, satire is entertainment and a weapon and also very dangerous ...and they knew it.

Uneasy Pharisees tried to dampen the festival down – but to no avail. Jesus told them it was hopeless.

Courage and delight in the face of danger. How irritating is that!?

Just as we saw in the Ukraine when the Russians marched in – the people did not hide. Old men and women, mothers and children went out, not to protest but to tell them they were not afraid and that they should just turn around and go home. It must have been very unsettling.

Buffoonery was the forerunner of clowns. Clowns see the world through children's eyes and reduce adult behaviour to their level. Buffoons were much more political. It was not for children. They took their material from what was happening in society and exaggerated it ridiculously. As public theatre, it allowed the oppressed to laugh in the face of oppressors.

At various times it was tolerated and even supported by the authorities and at other times – downright dangerous – but was always, always an expression, or you could say, a release valve for the masses. It took giants and made them small and allowed people to express what was otherwise injustice and cruelty.

Buffoons in the Middle Ages wore brightly coloured, garish clothing and played musical instruments. They often carried pretend sceptres and wore hats which mimicked crowns. They were the only people in court who could make fun of the monarch, even indirectly.

Buffoons were expected to amuse the court, but they had to walk a fine line between being amusing and being offensive. Some monarchs expected their so-called “fools” to be sharp, witty, and political, and buffoons were sometimes the only ones bold enough to make critical comments about the condition of the kingdom. They spoke truth to power but in a playful language.

Now we have comedy presenters holding up mirrors that exaggerate current affairs and bounce them in the faces of our political masters. People like Adam Hills on *the last Leg*, Sammy Jay or Mark Humphries on the *7:30 report* take the cues from the news. They are modern day court jesters.

But it is more than that. Have you heard about soft war? Soft war is a term they use for aggressive action that is not on the battlefield. It includes state-sponsored cyberattacks; political sabotage (leaking information or interference); economic restraints and sanctions (like China’s ban on Australian imports and ours on Russia), mis-information - particularly if it leads to civil disquiet or lack of trust and lots more. We are at war now and have been for some time. While the battle in the Ukraine rages – the soft war is being fought across the world both as aggressors and defenders.

It may be a game changer. Wars of mutual destruction are bad for business. Weapon designers have been trying to invent weapons that destroy people – not infrastructure. Whoever wins in the Ukraine will have to build hospitals, schools, electricity grids and roads *before* the economy can even get rise to its knees.

Last week, I said to Geoff, it would be funny (not funny ha-ha but funny weird) if the Russian-Ukrainian war was won by a pencil. The story behind that is simple. In the 1960s, the Americans spent millions of dollars (and I mean millions) on research to develop a pen that would write in zero gravity. It was a pen that astronauts could use in space. I have one and yes, it writes upside down. Amazing. The Russians sent their cosmonauts up with a pencil.

As Putin expends millions of dollars and thousands of lives on the invasion – a small article appeared in the American press. It was a ‘leaked’ document from the CIA saying that Putin was lied to by his generals, that he no longer had the support of his intelligence agencies and that they had failed him in not telling him how committed and well trained the Ukrainians were. He was led to believe it would all be over in a week. His armed forces had also lied to him on the number of casualties and in particular, the number of generals he had lost.

A few days later, another article appeared from the French Intelligence service. Supposedly independent of the USA, the French had discovered from valued sources that the Russian military had misinformed Putin. A few days later British intelligence released data on similar lines including how frail and unhinged Putin had become and how isolated he had become with many of his close advisors now missing. The report noted that the population was increasingly anti-war despite the media lockdown because they were getting information from elsewhere. Many Russians have relatives in the Ukraine.

The point is, people like Hitler or Putin and some other leaders I won't mention, isolate themselves and surround themselves with people too afraid to tell them the truth. But their hyper-egos make them vulnerable. It is easy to play on their paranoia, especially with mockery, and it makes them make stupid decisions. Now the rumour is that Putin has exiled his intelligence chief, fired the commanders and is making all the decisions himself without expert knowledge. He may single-handedly lose the war with no one left to blame. Doubt is an invisible enemy that is difficult to fight. He might be defeated by ink.

Inevitably, Palm Sunday carries a strong note of irony and it seeded doubt.

The Romans can't fight an invisible king. They can't raise an army against God. They don't know what to do in the face of a population making fun of them even though they are aware of the danger. Martin Luther King and Gandhi based their protest movements on Christian theology and praxis.

The Romans persecuted Christians and the result was the movement grew. It was like trying to stomp out a fire in pine needles. Stomp here – it pops up there. Ultimately, the Romans lost the war – passive resistance for a people loyal to an authority above them was impossible to kill – especially as the people believed in a life beyond death. Historically, Rome realised that they couldn't fight a belief so they needed to join it and own it – which is how in 325, Constantine called Council of Nicaea to come up with a universal understanding that could be adopted by the state and ultimately underpinned the power of the Catholic Church.¹

Jerusalem was full of pilgrims for Passover. They were pouring in through every gate. The Romans would have been on high alert. Followers of Jesus were seeded amongst the crowds. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was to establish a different kind of kingdom: the Kingdom of God. Save us! It is clear from the parable of the pounds, which immediately precedes the story of his arrival in Jerusalem, that the Kingdom would not be immediate...the people would have to wait in faith and that is where the power lies. They knew the danger and Jesus knew the sacrifice. In the parable of the pound (Luke 19:11), Jesus asks what will the slaves do in the time their master is away? Will they be faithful?

We will march and we will sing – we will have a spectacle for Easter and we do it unashamedly. I am happy to be a fool for God. I would put on a belled cap and coloured stockings and march down Main Street if that is what it takes to bring peace to the world.

Is it an accident that the Prime Minister of the Ukraine was a comedian in his former life? or was God's Captain's pick?

The most powerful weapons available are in our soft armoury: laugh in the face of oppressors; talk about injustices aloud and hold faith diligently in the unbreachable vaults of our souls.

¹ Putin too, has harnessed the Russian orthodox church to underpin his power.