God and the last laugh

St. Brandon's Genesis 18: 1-10a; Colossians 1: 15-28; Luke 10: 38-end 21st July 2019

'In the beginning, all was still and God laughed. And because God laughed the waters took up the roar and the ripple of it; and ebbed and flowed and seeped and swirled and delighted in the ways of its being.'

That is from a Liturgy of Creation[1] that I found on the internet when I was looking for something slightly different. Although both were about God's laughter, I don't think it's as good as the thing I was looking for, but it will have to do.

'In the beginning, all was still and God laughed. And because God laughed the waters took up the roar and the ripple of it; and ebbed and flowed and seeped and swirled and delighted in the ways of its being.'

But you might be wondering where the idea of God's laughter and creation's response comes from, given today's readings where laughter doesn't appear at all. Let me try to explain. Our OT reading is slightly odd in that in the immediately preceding chapter, God has already told Abraham that He will bless his wife Sarah and will give him a son by her (17: 16). So our reading, while a bit different in terms of the three visitors who are nonetheless 'The Lord', essentially repeats what Abraham has already been told. But Abraham's reaction to the news the first time round was this: 'Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' (17: 17). So there is some laughter associated with this story, even if it's a form of scoffing rather than merriment.

But you might also know that in our reading Sarah is eavesdropping on the conversation between Abraham and the three men, and her reaction just after our reading is similar to Abraham's: 'So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' (18: 12). And while, when confronted, she denies laughing, the Lord knows that she did indeed laugh, or again perhaps better, scoff at His promise.

But you'll probably also know that the story unfolds with Sarah indeed becoming pregnant and giving birth to a son, Isaac, just as God had promised. So who has the last laugh? God, of course, though in a positive sense, not the negative sense we usually associate with the phrase. God has the last laugh.

Ah but, when Isaac is born, Sarah says this: 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me' (21: 6). It seems that God isn't the only one who gets to have the last laugh; Sarah laughs too, but this time in delight not in derision. And so too does everyone who hears her story. And they are not laughing *at* Sarah, as they might well have done before when she was childless. Now they are laughing *with* her. What a lovely picture that is!

Now that story set me off on a search for laughter in the Bible. But the trouble with a sermon about laughter is that it's not very funny. So here's a joke just to keep you going. [Baby, honey, tummy, dummy] Back to the Bible where laughter itself doesn't occur very often, although there are of course rough synonyms like being exhorted to rejoice – Philippians 4: 4 for example: 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice'. When God laughs it's often in the Psalms and God is laughing *at* the nations or the wicked: 'He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them [the nations] in derision' (2: 4); '... the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that their day is coming' (37: 13). Psalm 126 does, however, have the positive side of laughing: 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion ... then our mouth was filled with

[1] See http://www.wellsprings.org.uk/liturgies/creation.htm

laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy' (1-2). However, the negative side seems to dominate again when the philosopher in Ecclesiastes declares, 'I said of laughter, 'It is mad', and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' (2: 2), or again, 'Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad' (7: 3) – an odd proverb implying that sorrow is somehow good for you. But at least Ecclesiastes does contain the verse that 'For everything there is a season ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh' (3: 1, 4). And we get something similar in Luke's version of the beatitudes, when Jesus says, 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh' (6: 21). And if that is so, then again perhaps it implies that, like Sarah, we, probably with God, will get the last laugh in that positive sense.

And that provides a sort of link into our gospel reading. This particular Martha and Mary story is unique to Luke's gospel, and I suspect that there is a good deal of humour here, even though there's no mention of laughter as such, with Jesus, quite possibly with a twinkle in His eye, chiding Martha in a way that might have made her and everyone else laugh. 'Come on Martha, the dinner can wait for once. Loosen up. Have you heard the one about the baby and honey …'. But we pick up Martha and Mary's story again in John's gospel when their brother Lazarus falls seriously ill and then dies (John 11: 1-44). And you'll probably recall that when Jesus eventually goes to them, He raises Lazarus from the dead. There is a lot of weeping in that story, including by Jesus Himself, but we can probably bet that there was also a great deal of laughter when Lazarus was raised. And Lazarus might well have echoed Sarah's words back in Genesis: 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears [my story] will laugh with me'. Who gets the last laugh in this case? Well Jesus, Lazarus, Martha, Mary, the disciples, the Jews who had come to console Martha and Mary. 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.'

What, then, of our complicated NT reading from Colossians? As well as the wonderful pictures of Christ as the image of the invisible God, the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, this passage also acknowledges the fractured nature of the creation. It is a place that needs reconciliation, implying that there is currently disharmony. It needs peace to be made, implying that there is currently a lack of peace. And the world as we experience it, both in the peoples of the world and in the created order is a place over which there is much to weep. But whether our weeping is over personal tragedy, as with Martha and Mary, or over the many other tragedies of nations at war, terrorism, the oppression and poverty that exists in the world, the destruction of the environment on which we all depend, and so on and on, what this passage tells us is that through Christ God has been pleased to reconcile to Himself all things thereby making peace. It is right that we weep now for all these things that have gone wrong, and act to try to put them right. It is also right that we hold on to that great hope that there will be a resolution. 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.' In other words, God will have the last laugh, and it will be a laughing *with* and not *at* His creation, a laughing in which, with Christ in us, the hope of glory, we are invited to join.

We are told in Revelation that God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes, that mourning and crying and pain will be no more because the first things will have passed away (21:4). Those who weep now for all the tragedies in the world, personal and otherwise, will laugh. So perhaps, not just in the beginning but 'In the end, all will be still and God will laugh. And because God will laugh the waters will take up the roar and the ripple of it; and will ebb and flow and seep and swirl and delight in the ways of its being.' And we will be invited to join in, and laugh with God.

Amen, may it be so.