

THE CLOWN

Patrick Purnell

THE PROFESSION OF THE CLOWN IS A VENERABLE ONE. History places the clown in the courts of bishops, emperors and kings, in baronial halls, in the fairs and marketplaces of shire towns, in village squares and, today, inevitably, on our television screens. His natural home is the circus, the small oval ring, spread with sawdust under the big top. Generation after generation has applauded him, with his chalk white face and brow, red, bulbous nose and red mouth etched in a permanent grin. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Clown. See! Look! The man you've all been waiting for!' And at the sound of the ringmaster's voice, on he trots in a dress as traditional as that of the butcher or baker, and as liturgical as that of a priest: a vast pair of trousers, a shapeless jacket, a conical cap, and floppy shoes and gloves. He is welcomed by the audience as a host greets a guest of long standing. They will have known him from last year or the year before or from childhood days. The adults smile; the children shriek. He goes into his act; the rite begins.

'I give you the Clown!' The Clown is a caricature of funniness—too funny to be funny. He is the quintessence of over-acting. Meekly, he stands to meet the gaze of his audience, falls to provoke its laughter, tumbles with skill to merit its admiration. Then, almost sadly, he bows to accept its applause. His routine gathers momentum. The audience has not forgotten. He must do what he did last year, and the year before, and the year before that. Otherwise the audience feels cheated. The Clown is a contradiction—a sad funny man, underdog, loser, victim, dupe, stooge and mug; yet, with a twist of fortune, he is also tormentor and scourge and persecutor, mocking the arrogance and foibles of humanity. Like a fencer, with parry and thrust, he pierces pomposity, needles authority, pricks hypocrisy; he exposes greed, laughs at religiosity, apes snobbery, smiles at vanity, reveals cruelty, and unmasks inadequacy. Yet tormentor though he be, he is touched by compassion for his victim. His is a gentle mockery, not that of the sadist who dehumanises the unfortunate with the laughter of

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Sweet Clown

Sweet Clown,
You blessed the cup,
Gave thanks to God,
And passed the cup
Among those
Who sat at table;
Each took the cup,
And raised it up
To catch your eye
And nervously they spoke
The customary greeting:
'Long life to you!'
They drank your health
In the blood you'd shed,
Whilst they shredded the bread
You had made your own,
And ate the life
You gave away.

arrogance. His mockery has within it a healing balm. For he does not, he cannot, mock from a sense of superiority, because he knows what it is to be the victim. He does not despise the object of his persecution; he knows himself to be no different. His profession is to be a living critique of a humanity of which he is also a part.

The Clown acts in the name of truth. He has a fatal desire for the truth—fatal because it inevitably leads to his downfall, as with everyone else who espouses truth for truth's sake. The truth which he passionately embraces is the truth about himself—Everyman! Life for Mr and Mrs Everyman is not, never has been, and never will be, a bowl of cherries. The truth is that a custard pie is more likely to wrap itself round their heads than find its way into their bellies. Such is life as the Clown finds it, and he cannot pretend otherwise. To portray it, he allows himself to be humiliated, brought low, debased and degraded by any and every device that human ingenuity can construct.



For three years Isaiah stood naked whenever he preached, in order to symbolize publicly the defeat and capture of Jerusalem by the Egyptians. Jeremiah shouldered a yoke and paraded himself before the powers of the world to inform them that God had put their kingdoms into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. Ezekiel made a hole through the walls of Jerusalem in the sight of the people and, in the evening, with an exile's bundle over his shoulder, he set out into the dark, miming the coming exile of his race. Hosea married a whore and had children by her, for Israel had become nothing but a whore when it abandoned Yahweh. Such were the parabolic actions of the prophets. The Clown is their successor, pursuing the same craft. The Fool, the Clown and the Prophets belong to one brotherhood—the brotherhood of salt: the function of salt is to give savour, but if the salt loses its taste, it is fit for nothing but to be cast out and trampled on.

Sift the salt from humanity, and its life assumes the drab nonentity of mere existence.

This brotherhood of salt is passionately committed to the life, history and destiny of the human race; it is completely involved in humanity's searchings and longings; and yet, at the same time, the members of the brotherhood have the charism of 'outsiders'. They are not so involved in humanity's progressive theories, schemes, propositions and assumptions that they cannot pierce, prick, needle, nettle, attack and criticize its philosophical and religious presuppositions. The members of the brotherhood are 'insiders' graced with the vision and insight of 'outsiders'; they have an appreciation of reality gleaned from a world that 'could be'. This reality has transcendental and paradoxical parameters which deny the finality of death and disaster, and it goes beyond human imperfection and limitation towards the infinite. Israel's survival as a people depended on her being submerged by Babylon. Humanity's survival depends on its death. Only those who fall flat on their faces know the integrity of standing on their feet.

The Fool, the Clown and the Prophet find it difficult to live comfortably in society; they are too aware of the untruth and the unreality of its life. They experience this ambivalence in their own lives. Jeremiah sat hunched in the stocks, not only as a symbol of the suffering nation, but also because he knew it was just. The heart of clowning is being one's own clown. It takes insight into the human condition freely to become its victim; it takes intelligence to sit down on a chair precisely at the moment that it is being pulled away; it takes wit to be showered with soot, flour and water; and it takes wisdom to see the justice of being trampled upon, beaten and knocked to the ground. The rich need neither insight, nor intelligence, nor wit, nor wisdom to take their ease in the Hilton Hotel; but the Clown needs all of these to be born in a stable when he could have been born in the Hilton.

Ezekiel has a parable about the Lord Yahweh and Jerusalem: how Yahweh discovered her as an infant struggling in her blood; and how he breathed life into her; and how she grew into a beautiful maiden whom he clothed in his own splendour, in the finest dresses, and whom he decked out in jewellery. 'Because you loved me', said St Augustine, 'you made me lovable'. There is a ballet about an exceedingly beautiful and noble young princess and a poor impoverished clown. Princes

come from far and wide to woo the princess. Each suitor, noble and rich, sets out his claim for the princess' hand in a carefully executed dance. But the clown worships her from afar. Ineptly, he attempts to dance his love for her. He has nothing to lay before her but his love. Clumsily, he weaves in and out, parodying the stylized perfection of the dancing princes. He wants nothing for her but that she should be happy. He dares not even admit her to his dreams—that would be blasphemy. The princess sees him and immediately recognises his love; she responds by beginning to dance for him. He tries gropingly to match his steps to her graceful movements; slowly, hesitatingly, his dance becomes one with hers; he is transformed. He forgets himself; his movements outshine the classical brilliance of the princes. But then the music moves to a climax, and he remembers who he is; his feet stumble; his arms droop; he is once more enveloped in his voluminous garb. If the princess loves him, she must love him for what he is, a poor clown. He cannot dissemble. He stumbles and falls. The ballet closes as the princess lifts him up; her love for him transforms him and enables her to see through to the reality within. This is the reality, the truth, at the very heart of the Clown.

There is another reality which is also questioned by the Clown, and that is the reality which forms the fabric of every person's life. Everyone needs security—the tangible assurance that all is right with the world. Let this reality be shattered, and the bottom falls out of their existence. The framework of Peter's life was built around water, boats and fish. To fish the lake one needed a boat. This reality was demolished the day a Clown taught him to walk on water. He took only a few steps in the face of the blustering gale, but those few steps dissolved his world. You didn't need a boat to fish. Nor did you need money in your purse when you set out to preach the Good News, nor a second pair of shoes, nor a spare shirt—not even a pack for the road. Prayer moved mountains. Five loaves and two fish were enough to feed five thousand. You picked up your tax money from the mouth of a fish.

**'What is real?' asked the Rabbit.
'It's a thing that happens to you',
answered the Skin Horse.
'Does it hurt?'
'Sometimes', said the Skin Horse,
for he was always truthful. 'When
you're real, you don't mind being
hurt.'**

**Margery Williams,
*The Velveteen Rabbit***

Bread could be flesh, and wine blood. 'Security' was the last thing that made you secure. And the Clown laughs, thinking it all so simple!

In the world of Jesus under the big top, the 'first' is 'last' and the 'last' is 'first'. Like all clowns he finds the self-important and the authoritarian irresistible targets for buffoonery. The apostles' solemn debate as to which of them was the most important was too much for Jesus; it was preposterous! Miming for him was a serious art. He swung into his act. But first he had to divest himself of his outer garment in order to reveal his inner identity of love. Then he put on a towel for an apron, filled a basin with water, assumed the demeanour of a slave in contrast to the status of those at table; the elements were all present. He moved from one to the next, washing the feet of each with exaggerated care. Bewildered! Why don't they see the fun? Then he came to Peter, and Peter wasn't playing; Peter couldn't see the joke. Who claimed to be greatest? Was it all too near the knuckle? And so the Clown had to plead with Peter, coax him to join the fun, because unless he did, how could he be one of the Kingdom's children? Had He erred, to put the show on the road? Had he chosen a man who didn't have a sense of humour, a man who wasn't a clown?

Every act has its climax. The lion tamer abandons caution and risks his life; the trapeze artist accomplishes her most spectacular feat; likewise, the Clown has his moment. The ringmaster, costumed in a Roman toga, loudly announces the Clown's finale: 'See the Man!' And on comes the little man once more, with his chalky face and permanent grin, clothed in imperial purple with a royal crown on his head. It is a pretend crown, made from thorns. The audience leans forward to become actors in the performance. They boo and hiss, encouraged by the villain of the piece. 'Away with him! Kill him! Put him to death! Crucify him!' A scaffold appears. The executioners in black move centre stage. The arena is plunged into darkness. A spotlight is turned on and the audience is allowed one blinding look at a white face, on which the red greasepaint has begun to run, before the whole auditorium is returned to darkness. For a brief moment there is utter silence, and then the frail sound of a whimper. Was this the world ending? The heart of the crowd is still. What have they done? He was only a harmless fool. Was he not one of them? A friend? Would there, could there, ever be another circus? Suddenly in the darkness they hear the beginnings of a laugh which makes their spines tingle. The laugh enfolds them, encircles them. Instantaneously the lights come

on, and those who are alert catch a glimpse of the little fellow in his preposterous garments with his make-up half off, disappearing through the exit.

'Queer antics, these clowns get up to!'

'Didn't half give me a turn!'

'They shouldn't be allowed to do that sort of thing!'

'I say, quite extraordinary what some people do for a laugh!'

Patrick Purnell SJ worked for many years in secondary education and catechetics, serving as Advisor on Religious Education to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales. Currently he is engaged in spiritual direction and in retreat giving, and lives in the multicultural setting of Southall, West London. He is the author of *Our Faith Story* (London: Collins, 1985), and his most recent book is *Imagine*, a collection of poems (Oxford: Way Books, 2004).



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