

GROWING Together

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WHAT KIND OF FOOL AM I?

We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ...(I Corinthians Ch. 4: 9f)

The word fool originally meant someone who was mad. Then it came to include those who adopt the guise of a madman to make us laugh or think – or both.

Fools do foolish things because they see the world differently. Sometimes they are laughably or tragically wrong. Sometimes they are astonishingly right.

It was St. Paul who introduced believers to the idea of the foolishness of the gospel and the foolishness of God. I suspect that Paul was by nature a proud man who hated to be laughed at. Yet he was willing, he said, to be a fool for Christ – an ambassador for the vulnerable, foolish God.

From Paul onwards the theme of holy foolishness runs through Christian cultures – popping up in the holy fools of Russian literature, in St. Francis of Assisi and his brother *jongleurs*, and in the institution of the court jester. The jester was a man retained by a great household to make people laugh. He had license to take liberties, and thus was able to speak truth to power. He used humour to deflate balloons of pride. He had, at least for a moment or two, God's power to cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalt the humble and meek.

The jester's close relative is the clown, who in the Middle Ages was a professional interrupter – popping up in church and in the lecture hall. Clowns today still make their living by laughter, and at the root of laughter is contradiction. Think of the big man zooming around the circus ring in a tiny car, or the bully who gets a bucket of whitewash down his trousers. Christian clown Rev. Roly



Bain processes up the aisle in a tattered robe, holding aloft a feather duster, then turns and solemnly says to the congregation, "Let us play". Clowns cut through pretense, expose contradictions, and, for a time, turn the world upside down.

Turning the world upside down was the mission of the medieval festival called the Feast of Fools. It was a day when the rules - especially the rule of elders - did not apply. One was chosen to reign as Lord of Misrule or Abbot of Unreason and 'consecrated' with outlandish ceremonies. Revelry, parody and satire reigned for one glorious, dangerous day – exposing the pretensions of power, reminding us that all our careful arrangements might well be different.

Today Rick Mercer is one of Canada's court jesters – willing to be foolish himself, bringing the great down to earth, speaking truth to power in his Rant. Where else today are our holy fools? Perhaps you should look in your pulpit...

Fools, jesters and clowns echo the laughter of God, and point to God's wise foolishness – to a God who does things backwards, choosing to redeem a proud and pretentious humanity by coming in person, in weakness. The author of life is content to die, laughed at and in shame, on a cross, and then – contradiction of contradictions – to rise again. That is why the ancient church observed Holy Humour Sunday the week after Easter, to celebrate the great joke God played on sin, death and the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. God always has the last laugh – and invites us to join in.

Books: Roly Bain, [Playing the Fool, Clowning Glory](#); G. K. Chesterton, [St. Francis](#); Harvey Cox, [Feast of Fools](#); Morris West, [The Clowns of God](#)

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