



Create a peaceful space to pause, and allow yourself to feel God's presence alongside you, as near to you as your own breath. In following the reflection below, as a church we will draw closer to God and to one another as we grow in faith and deepen our sense of belonging to God.

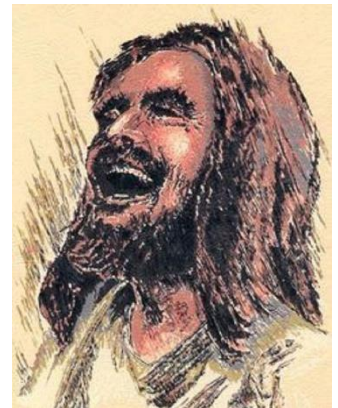
Genesis 18:9-15 'Sarah Laughs at the Words of the Three Guests'

⁹ They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' ¹⁰ Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' ¹³ The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"' ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

You don't often come across instances of people laughing in the Bible. There are just three in Job, four in the Psalms, one in Proverbs, one in Ecclesiastes (which is a pretty depressing book, anyway – 'Sorrow is better than laughter...' (7:3)). There are more examples of 'laughing to scorn' than there are instances of genuine mirth. In fact, I could only find two references in the entire New Testament, and they were in Luke. If we didn't know better, we might deduce from this that as Christians we're not supposed to laugh – which would be nonsense.

However, the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 should make us all smile – especially when we recall that in the previous chapter, it was Abraham who 'fell on his face and laughed' with incredulity (Genesis 17:17), so the writer isn't having a dig at women in chapter 18! Essentially, the passage from Genesis above is asking us to re-evaluate our trust in a God who can not only surprise us but who keeps his promises, however unpromising a situation may seem. And remember, Sarah did indeed have a child – it was Isaac, of course. And the name 'Isaac'? It means 'God has laughed'!

The picture opposite (by Willis Wheatley, the art director of the United Church of Canada) is entitled 'The Laughing Christ', though the artist preferred the title given by a colleague: 'Jesus Christ – Liberator'. I'm sure that Jesus laughed as much as any of us do, and I wonder what John Wesley would have made of the picture, as some of you will probably be remembering that he told the early Methodists in 1744 to 'avoid all lightness as you would avoid hell-fire, and laughing as you would [avoid] cursing and swearing' – though I feel that this was one of the few examples of less worthy advice from the great man!



'The Laughing Christ'
by Willis Wheatley

We must never be afraid of laughter, even the nervous sort. And if we trust God – even if it's with difficulty, as I suspect it will be for many of us in the current climate – then we shall find him smiling on us, and in his smile, a lasting blessing.

Prayer: Loving God, you share our laughter and our tears,
for there are no limits to your compassion and love for us.
Teach us sensitivity, and allow us laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep. Save us from pomposity, and allow us the humility to laugh at ourselves at times. We ask this for your love's sake. **Amen.**