



HOLY FOOLS

On this near-conjunction of April Fool's Day and Easter, we might consider the appropriateness of this alignment. Every religious tradition has the equivalent of the holy fool who functions as a kind of court jester in the kingdom of God. The Old Testament prophets behaved in all sorts of outlandish ways to make a point. Hosea married a prostitute to underscore Israel's waywardness, and Ezekiel gave the Israelites a taste of things to come by baking his bread over cow manure. The prophet Elijah once appeared to Rabbi Baruqa in a vision and told him that no one would share in the world to come except two men who had come into the marketplace. The pair turned out to be jesters.

The Christian saints picked up where the Old Testament prophets left off. The pattern was set by the desert fathers, who took St. Paul at his word when he said "we are fools for Christ's sake." The patron saint of holy fools was Simeon Salos, who subsisted on lentils for nearly 30 years in the wilderness before arriving in the Syrian town of Emesha dragging a dead dog tied to his waist by a rope. He snuffed out candles during worship services, threw nuts at the priests and ate sausages on Good Friday. He performed many good deeds as well but always in secret. The yurodivy, or holy fools, of the Russian Orthodox Church, followed a similar pattern until the authorities lost patience with them, and they were suppressed under Peter the Great (1668-1725).

To play the fool is not the same thing as being one – a distinction Shakespeare was always careful to make. As Viola observed in Twelfth Night, the jester Feste "is wise enough to play the fool, and to do that well craves a kind of wit." His position gives him unusual license to

speak his mind, but with the proviso that he must never be taken seriously. Like the Old Testament prophets, he speaks the truth to power, yet does so with impunity, something the prophets were rarely able to manage. Oscar Wilde, himself a notable wit in his day, once remarked, "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you."

The mythologist Joseph Campbell declared the holy fool to be the most dangerous cultural archetype because of the threat posed to the established order. By their bizarre words and actions, these divine messengers demonstrate what Jesus meant when he said his kingdom was not of this world. However, he did not mean that the kingdom of God was somewhere else. Granted, it is not the world we know; it is the world as God created it, right here, right now, right under our very noses. This is what the holy fools of the world are trying to call our attention to. They tell the truth, and it sounds like utter madness. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Take no thought for the morrow. This is God's world, and he is laying claim to his own.

The biggest fool of all may have been Jesus Christ himself. Against all evidence to the contrary, he proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. He coddled sinners and excoriated the righteous. He saw to it that hungry people ate their fill when there didn't appear to be enough food to go around. He could make people think that water was the finest wine. He got them to believe the lame could walk, the blind could see and the dead could live. He was obviously mad -- and dangerously so. The authorities figured they could put an end to his antics by putting an end to him. Yet here we are 2,000 years later still struggling to come to terms with him. Was he a man? Was he a god? Was he putting us on? It turns out that Jesus, the holy fool, might have gotten the last laugh. -- Eric Rennie