

Easter Sunday 2011
Twente, Arnhem

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 28:1-10

Resurrection: the Joys & Fears of all the Years

This past week – Holy Week – many of us have taken time, in our worship and daily devotion, to retrace the final days of Jesus before his death for us on the Cross. It is a week of deep meaning, and one of great contrasts, as I noted last Sunday.

On Palm Sunday, we processed, carrying palms and singing Jesus' praises, to recall the triumphant, indeed, 'royal' welcome Jesus received when he entered Jerusalem that final time. Jesus had once lamented (Matt 23:37-39):

23:³⁷ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸See, your house is left to you, desolate. ³⁹For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

We read the Passion story, too, about the mock trial where Jesus, though totally innocent, was condemned. Yet he did not open his mouth against his accusers.

On Maundy Thursday, the day of the Great Mandatum, or Command, Jesus gave us at the Last Supper, to love one another, we gathered in Twente and Arnhem to share a holy meal with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of us experienced how Jesus took water and washed his disciples, the act of a servant, that demonstrates the basic premise of all Christian conduct: loving service. Others gathered to share a Passover Seder meal, the ancient Jewish foundation of our Holy Communion, which, just like its antecedent, celebrates freedom and new life in God.

On Good Friday, we retraced Christ's final steps on that fateful journey from Pilate's house to Calvary. We heard of the pain and agony that he bore for us, and of the immense love and determination that drove him on.

Then, Holy Saturday, appropriately named 'Stille Zaterdag' in Dutch. It is an odd, quiet, in between sort of day. It captures, in a small way, where we stand – between the life of Christ at his first coming of Christ and the full and wondrous arrival of the New Creation we await when he comes again.

What a week. If you have followed it, you may feel prepared, in a way, for the full force of Easter.

But whatever your preparation, Easter is always a surprise. Easter is about the impossible, the incredible, the unthinkable, come true.

For the followers of Jesus, all seemed lost, hopeless, dark and sad. Palm Sunday held promise, but Good Friday seemed to end it all in crushing fashion. The forces of death and evil seemed to have won the day.

As we look around us at our world and perhaps at our own lives and circumstances, it is sometimes easy to lose faith in hope, to lose faith in the possibility of resurrection.

But though as the Prophet Jeremiah knew, God who created everything is capable of turning anything around, even our deepest misery: ²⁰ My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. ²¹ But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. ²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.'

The Christian faith is the Resurrection Faith: it believes that God can turn anything around for the better. It is based on the Resurrection of Christ, who leads each of us to life.

St Matthew's story of the Resurrection of Christ captures the miraculous wonder of this perhaps best.

Mary Magdalene and the other unknown Mary go to the tomb the morning of the first day of the week. Did they somehow know that God's mercies were indeed new every morning? Did they know his great faithfulness? They were about to find it!

All Israel had been looking forward to the Messiah, yet somehow no one anticipated how he would come, how he would be attacked and killed, or what would happen next.

There is an earthquake. 'Seismoi' occur in Matthew: the earth spoke at Jesus death, too, shaking the centurion beneath the cross to proclaim that Jesus was God's Son. And heaven spoke too, through the dazzling white angel of the Lord.

There are two human reactions. On the one hand: the guards, who are so knocked out, they are as good as dead. Are they a parable for those who refuse to be alive to the glories of God? On the other hand, there are Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, also scared, but open, seeking the truth, however remarkable it may be.

They are shown the empty tomb, but they are promised they will see Jesus. Two words leapt off the page at me this year as I read the reaction of the women: Fear and Great Joy. A completely natural response. Then and now. Or at least it should be.

There are church traditions that emphasize the fear of the Lord in the face of his power. That is right, in part: we are mere mortals. Despite all that humanity has achieved in science, technology and economics, we have a long way to go, spiritually and morally,

before peace and justice and goodness are commonplace. Perhaps we do not have a long way to go, but a long way to come back: back to God. Perhaps our troubles are in part due to the fact that we do not fear God, but rather want to play God. But all the wars, economic crises, natural disasters and personal struggles recur. While they cannot be blamed on God, they do point up that we humans are not so much in control as we think. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

But Mary and Mary felt Fear and Great Joy. Joy at the wonders they could only begin to imagine at seeing the empty tomb. I was once reminded by a friend whose spouse was near death that he had known many resurrections along the way in his life. We have seen the resurrection of hope in N Africa and the Middle East today. A mark of that was seen when Muslims protected Christians on the Tarir Plaza in Cairo. And the Christians gathered round to protect their Muslim brothers and sisters, too. Jesus, in his final hours, fell on the way to Calvary, but rose again and again, determined to complete his mission of salvation.

Ours is a Resurrection faith – it leaves us in awe and fills us with joy. When the Marys met Christ, they fell in worship at his feet.

I know it is Easter, but a favourite Christmas Carol leaps to mind:
O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by:
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to-night.

If that was the case at his birth, then we can say at Easter:
The joys and fears of all the years were met in Christ that morn.

Our faith is not mystical, it is not just intellectual, it is an experience of the Resurrection. It is Resurrection Faith, full of the awe and power, the fears and hopes, of meeting the Almighty God of Life, who loves us & can turn anything around. Happy Easter! Amen!