

Two counterparts, as usual – weeping & mourning v laughter and dancing.

This reminds me of the Easter passion. Jane is speaking next week on the Palm Sunday narrative – a day of joy and almost certainly dancing. The air filled with joyous renderings of Hosanna; as the crowd perceive Jesus to be the long awaited Messiah as he enters Jerusalem.

Skip forward five days to Good Friday – a day of betrayal, despair, shame, anguish and eventually death through crucifixion. And at the cross, as darkness fills the sky there are the two Marys standing beside another Mary, Jesus' mother and the disciple whom Jesus loved. Grief filled, mourning for the loss of a loved one, no doubt weeping. A time when comfort is needed.

Skip forward to the Sunday – a day of resurrection, new beginning; great hope and joy. Peter and John running to see what they believed was impossible – surely joy would have filled their hearts skipping, running to see for themselves the empty tomb no doubt shouting hallelujah; God be praised the ultimate expression of rejoicing and worship.

So how do you dance for joy when your hopes, your dreams, have been so cruelly demolished. How do you celebrate Easter when you're living Good Friday?

Theologically speaking we are saying Jesus defeated death on the cross in the old Jerusalem but we have been promised a new Jerusalem where death, crying and mourning will be no more. Or to put it another way there can be no resurrection (joy) without death (mourning).

Our knowledge and understanding of Jesus tells us these two counterpoints – weeping & mourning v laughter and dancing - means our world of affliction is ruled over by the God of comfort.

In our 2 Corinthians reading Paul mentions the word 'comfort ' 10 times in 5 verses.

Paul understands three basic facts that apply equally today:

1. We need in the midst of an uncertain world, comfort and security
2. The only source of that comfort is God and our relationship with him
3. The outcome of such comfort is the hope for that which lies before us - the new Jerusalem

In our own way we encounter Good Friday and Easter Sunday like events – we call them the highs and lows of our lives. How we deal with them as a Christian is what makes us different from everyone else. Comfort, compassion, grace, love....these are the things which help us understand and transform the journey from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

Many of you here today were present at both the funeral of my wife, Dorcas and the marriage to Jane 3 years later and will know exactly what I mean about examples in my own life of weeping and mourning contrasting with laughter and dancing.

For many of us there are times when simply doing something we love is sufficient to take us into the realms of laughter and dancing. I absolutely love dancing to 1960's and 70's disco music. I only get the opportunity 3 or 4 times a year but when I'm in that dancing zone I get so that I'm absolutely oblivious to the laughter of everyone else who think it is hilarious. And you know what, I don't give a fig....I'm full of joy.

And that is in total contrast to the times when I have to stand beside the bereaved; to offer comfort and support to those who are weeping and mourning. If anyone had asked a few years ago I would not have hesitated in saying that the one ministry you will never, ever catch me doing is funeral ministry..... it was so far out of my comfort zone that there was no way I would be of any use.

And yet, I have come to learn how to comfort those in need. I'm still learning but I now realize the truth of St. Paul's words in Romans 12: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn”.

And probably this was brought home to me most vividly when Jane and I went with Tearfund to Uganda. I want to share with you two short stories of people I met there:

The first, Joseph holds down two jobs within the Tearfund mission and the second, Moses is a shining example of what Tearfund is achieving:

Joseph's story – Joseph was abandoned by his unwed birth mother shortly after his birth. Joseph's father subsequently married and died early on in Uganda's civil war and his step mother who abused him repeatedly stabbed him one day in

a fit of temper causing Joseph to flee and he eventually ended up living as a teenage street beggar in Kampala.

His home was a disused sewer under a railway bridge and he survived (just) on his wits and petty thieving. One day a man found Joseph in a total state of collapse, starving and suffering from double pneumonia. The man took Joseph home where he and his wife cared for Joseph and nursed him back to comparatively good health and introduced him to the bible study courses which are at the heart of the Tearfund mission work in Uganda.

Their comfort of him in his time of need was so effective that Joseph's life was changed completely round. Joseph took up regular paid work in Kampala but spent every weekend for nearly a year tracing his younger siblings who had also fled to towns and villages scattered through Uganda and when found, brought them to live with him. As his finances improved, being the eldest surviving male member of his family he moved the family to a village outside of Kampala and took a second job in order to pay for his siblings' schooling.

He also took in, much against the wishes of his siblings, not only his step mother who had become destitute but also his birth mother. When I spoke with Joseph, he was adamant that he was only returning the love and comfort that he had been shown; he was the lucky one in this story and was doing no more and no less than Jesus taught us all to do.

Moses' story – The teenaged Moses was captured by the renegade Lord's Resistance Army in the Ugandan civil war during a raid on his village. He refused to join their fighters so was castrated with a machete and left to die. Against all the odds he survived but became what was described to me as a shell of a man.

His life was completely turned around by the compassion he experienced during the bible study projects his village entered into as part of the Tearfund initiatives. He became a model participant and through their different staged processes learnt animal husbandry, crop farming techniques and with encouragement and support of his newly wedded wife soon became the district's leading farming specialist.

Moses is certainly one of the most humble men I have ever met and instead of using his experience and new acquired skills to improve his own lifestyle, he uses his spare time to teach others. He does not charge for this; indeed he will often give his spare money and crop seed to others so they can start to live off the land too.

His compassion does not end there. He was incapable of fathering a family because of his castration but has adopted a number of his nieces, nephews and orphaned children and is paying for their schooling so that “they might be able to better themselves”.

These two men have come from the depths of despair to living a life which they separately declared as being one full of joy and happiness. Against all logic, they not only lived through their Good Friday but they now unhesitatingly celebrate their Easter Sunday whenever the opportunity arises.

Theirs is a world far removed from ours, yet they do not hesitate to provide comfort and security where it is needed. They say frequently and unequivocally that God loves them and they have learned to love others and are merely showing the love that Jesus expects of us all.

All they want to do, they say, is offer hope where needed because hope was the gift they received from those who comforted them in their darkest hour.

Their journey from Good Friday to Easter Sunday was made possible through the kindness, compassion and grace of others. Now they in turn are able to offer comfort to others and as they both freely admit they do so as the feet of Christ whilst working alongside the hands of Christ in the shape of Tearfund.

And that is the reason why I am commending the HTS Lent appeal to our HTS family.

Each of you has been given an envelope and my prayer is that something I have said today may stir you to give.

Tearfund's accounts are audited every year and it has been proven that 90p of every £1 they receive is paid over to those working on the ground. Furthermore that 90p is also independently audited each year to ensure that nothing goes astray into personal accounts in Uganda. That is amazing and even more reason not to hesitate in giving.