11th December 2011

**Psalm 126; John 1. 6–8, 19–28**

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy – Psalm 126.5

There are many tales of tears and laughter at this time of year.

A small church in a small community was struggling to make ends meet and were on the brink of closing. A commercial firm offered to supply free hymn books, provided they insert a bit of discreet advertising into the hymn books. The minister was reluctant but out of desperation finally agreed, when the hymn books arrived, the minister eagerly examined them and was delighted to find no brash advertisements on or inside the covers. The next Sunday, his flock began to sing from the hymn books. All went well until the third song, in which the congregation lifted their voices in unison to the melodious notes of;

‘Hark the herald angels sing,

Hanson’s pills are just the thing;

Peace on earth and mercy mild,

Two for men and one for child’

Oh the commercialisation of Christmas. True joy! Carol singing can also bring tears to the eyes.

One night a woman called Freda went carol singing. She knocked on the door of a house and began to sing. A man with a violin in his hand came to the door. Within half a minute tears were streaming down his face! Encouraged by this Freda went on singing for half an hour, every carol she knew – and some she didn’t.

At last she stopped.

‘’I understand’ she said softly, ‘you’re upset, because you’re remembering your happy childhood Christmas days. You’re a sentimentalist!’

‘No’ he snivelled, ‘I’m a musician!’

Our scripture reading Psalm 126, speaks about shouts and songs of joy. Where once there was tears there is now laughter; where there was weeping there are now songs of joy.

The European Community Summit was meant to save the Euro and all our economies. Will it end in tears – or will there be relieved songs of joy? Was David Cameron a British Bulldog or a foolish little Englander? The markets as ever will decide in the coming weeks.

For many people, the weeks before Christmas are not a happy time. Many are too busy and feel the pressure to make their Christmas celebrations memorable. Some are experiencing the loss of loved ones, the breakdown of relationships, serious illness, and economic uncertainty. Some are not looking forward to sharing time with their family. Some find the artificial jollity of the season painful to bear. What is the word of good news in such situations?

The Jewish historian Josephus records how in the year 4BC there was an uprising against the Romans in the town of Sepphoris in the Galilee region. Sepphoris was just a few miles north of Nazareth. The Romans were ruthless in putting down the insurrection. Three legions marched in to the region killing every young male they came across, making prisoners of women and children and plundering property. For Nazareth in 4BC either there was a timely flight to hiding places or its males were murdered, its females raped and its children enslaved. The Romans had a policy – they brought peace by force – the saying was ‘The Romans make a desert and call it peace’.

Most historians date the birth of Jesus just before the death of Herod in 4BC. The events of the Sepphoris suppression may have given rise to the accounts of Mary and Joseph leaving Nazareth for Bethlehem, and then fleeing as refugees to Egypt. They would return to Nazareth but as Jesus grew up in that place the major event in his village’s life was *the day the Romans came.* He would have heard, again and again about the day of the Romans – who had escaped and who had not, who had lived and who had died. This was his coming of age.

When the gospel writers tell of the accounts of Jesus, his birth, his ministry, his death and resurrection, this is the context. Its a million miles away from children dressing up in tea towels and bed sheets, turkey and tinsel. Not that we shouldn’t have a good time and lots of fun – that’s great. But don’t be conned like the rest of the world into thinking that the Nativity story is a sentimental irrelevance.

It was good news to people who were living in violent and harsh times, who were so desperate they didn’t have the luxury not to hope in God for deliverance. These people knew tears but now they believed that God had come to save them bringing peace, not through violence, but with joy and justice.

*Last week I spoke briefly about Isaiah 40 ‘Comfort my people’. We had some very moving testimonies from our new members about how God had been at work in their lives bringing comfort. Last week was seen the annual World Aids Day. I always remember the people of Kapelebyong in Uganda with whom I spent a few weeks with in the late 1990’s visiting a friend of ours who was working on a Christian relief project there. The church was vibrant and full of hope. About a third of the village were infected with HIV Aids. They always say there is someone worse off than you. That’s not much comfort for the person who is worse off than you. Where do they find comfort?*

*The people of Kapelebyong lived in mud huts and had nothing by our standards. Yet they had everything. Their hope was in God. Their citizenship was in a heavenly city. Their reward was to come. Their eyes were set not on the mess they were in now but on where God was calling them. The advent prayer ‘Come Lord Jesus Come’ was a prayer they cried from their hearts longing for the new world that is to come. That hope sustained them. The grass whithers the flowers fade but the word of God endures forever.*

Our reading today, from Psalm 126 speaks about tears and joy

**Psalm 126** is a “psalm of ascents,” one of a group of 15 psalms (120–134) to be sung by those on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Imagine a crowd of pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem and the temple. They have come from far and near to celebrate a festival. At last their destination is in sight. From the crowd come songs of praise and thanksgiving.

When those who were exiled in Babylon return to Zion, ancient Hebrew name for the area around Jerusalem and for the hill on which Solomon’s temple stood, they can hardly believe it. They are filled with joy. Though Solomon’s temple

has been destroyed, it will be rebuilt. The people will once again come to give thanks for God’s great gifts. God has restored their lives just as God sends rain to water the Negeb desert, an arid area in the south of ancient Palestine. God, the psalmist says, can send rain to make the desert blossom.

The psalm ends with a metaphor of planting and harvest. We sow seeds into the arid soil and water them with our tears. Perhaps these are all the seeds that are left to us. We might have ground them into flour from which to make a meal. Yet we plant them with hope that something more will come. And God gives a rich harvest. We return with joy, bringing home not just a few plants but sheaves of grain. God gives abundantly.

**John 1:6–8, 19–28** introduces John the Baptizer,

sent by God as a witness to the Light of God that was

coming into the world. John is not the Messiah, but

one who prepares the way for God’s coming among

us. Looking to the future, the gospel recalls God’s past

activity in sustaining the people of Israel.

There is a Jewish custom that says you should always

leave a corner or some part of your house unfinished

as a reminder that all is temporary. Many of our hopes and dreams are incomplete and we await their fulfilment. Advent is a time of waiting, expectantly in hope, for those dreams to be fulfilled. Joy is founded on the confidence that God is in

the midst of our lives, unfolding the promises that

have been spoken in our living.

A lady once came to Watchman Nee, the 20th century Chinese church leader who brought thousands to Christ in Communist china. She asked him to pray for her. ‘ I need more patience in my life’ she said.

Watchman Nee began to pray: ‘Lord, this sister needs patience, so I pray you will bring into her life tribulations, difficulties and hardships.’

The woman stopped him and said, ‘I asked you to pray for more patience’.

Watchman Nee said, ‘but you don’t understand. The Bible says tribulation works patience’ (Romans 5.3)

This answer sounds harsh, as we know that tribulation and suffering sometimes produce bitterness and anger. The point Watchman Nee was making, however, was that through tribulation we can discover that God is supporting us, and through this experience our faith in Him can grow.

To observe the South African Human Rights Day on March 21, 1995, Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached a sermon in St. George’s Cathedral, Capetown, using Psalm 126 as his text. As Archbishop Tutu reflected on the evils of apartheid and the abuses of human rights that took place under this regime, he found images of transformation in this Psalm 126 to express the joy and hope of his people as they began a new life together in South Africa. He said, ‘Now we are free and wonderfully it is not just blacks who have become free. We are free, all of us, black and white together. We have been transformed. We have been transfigured. The repulsive caterpillar has become a gorgeous butterfly of many colours.

Just as in the psalm, sorrow and weeping have been turned into shouts of joy. And it is not just the joy of the oppressed, but it is the joy of the oppressor as well. Both Israel and the surrounding nations are able to acknowledge God’s power and love. Both blacks and whites in South Africa are now free, transformed to live together as “the rainbow people of God.” In Psalm 126, Tutu found an apt metaphor to express the transformation from bondage and exile to freedom for all people. A dream that came true – but still needs ongoing work to sustain it.

This month has given us an opportunity to assess some more recent anniversaries which have shaped the modern world as we know it. In the USA, Americans mark the 70th anniversary of the [bombing of Pearl Harbour](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/8932197/Pearl-Harbour-memo-shows-US-warned-of-Japanese-attack.html) , which saw the USA enter the Second World War.

And in a week where the disputed Russian elections have led to [widespread protests](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16052329) , others have taken the opportunity to reflect upon the [20th anniversary](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/8932197/Pearl-Harbour-memo-shows-US-warned-of-Japanese-attack.html) of the break up of the old Soviet Union.

Many regard both these anniversaries as decisive moments in world history. In the case of Pearl Harbour, the USA’s undoubted might proved vital in changing the course of the Second World War. The resulting victory is still regarded as triumph for freedom and democracy, and the hope that the world will never see conflict on that scale again. More recently, the collapse of the Soviet Union was regarded as the end of the Cold War and totalitarianism in Europe, and the birth of societies that would embrace human rights, the rule of law and civil society.

As Christians we believe behind all things is God. Our world and our lives are in God’s hands. We have to do our bit. But God is ultimately faithful.

In a week where a report into this summer’s riots argued that they were caused by anger against the police, the [Archbishop of Canterbury](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/05/riots-return-young-archbishop-canterbury) has warned that we risk a repeat of these disturbances unless the government and civil society do more to ‘rescue those who think they have nothing to lose’.

This passage of Scripture, akin to all Advent-related verses, is very much about hope, which is arguably the opposite of despair.

We often use the terms ‘hope’ and ‘dreams’ interchangeably, but in fact there is a subtle difference between the two. It can be argued that dreams are whimsical, and often ignore, or make no attempt to address, a desperate situation. Conversely, hope can emerge from a desperate situation, and is the fruit of courage, confidence and a real understanding of the current state of affairs.

The hope we read about in today’s Scripture is a result of the Lord’s intervention. Christ, our strength and hope, will transform us, and the situation in which we live, into a world based on truth, justice and love. This hope is grounded in reality because it is based on God’s word, and manifested in the life of Jesus Christ, an historical figure who changed history.

The story of hope is not over yet, as we Christians will be celebrating once again this Christmas.

I love receiving Christmas cards from people I haven’t seen all year. Even if people only sign their name at least they remembered me and sent me a card. I know you can be cynical about the tradition of sending Christmas Cards but it is helpful to have a time each year to lift your head and look back and remind yourself of the people who have shared your life – who you have shared tears and laughter with. They were special times – they were special and will always be special, even if there is no meaningful relationship with them now. One day, maybe, those relationships will be meaningful once more. In the meantime it’s good to remember and be remembered..

The other year I received a card from a lady who I knew had been through a lot of trauma and had been brought low by all that experience. She said on her card it’s been a hard year – but I’m beginning to laugh again.

Some of you may be in the middle of tears. For some of you the tears may be drying out but the laughter has not come. For some of you this is the time of rejoicing.

Today’s scripture readings call us to “rejoice always,” to hear “good news,” and to “come home with shouts of joy.” What does such joy feel like to you? What causes you to rejoice? In the midst of Advent, we are reminded that God is full of surprises. Just when we are in the depths of despair, when it is hard to be hopeful, we are encouraged to remember God’s promises. We are encouraged to remember that God remembers us. God has done great things for us, and will do them again, even though we may not see that clearly now.

Some words by *By Ann Weems From her book* Kneeling in Bethlehem*.. (permission of Westminster John Knox Press.)*

The Christmas spirit

is that hope

which tenaciously clings

to the hearts of the faithful

and announces

in the face

of any Herod the world can produce

and all the inn doors slammed in our faces

and all the dark nights of our souls

that with God

all things still are possible,

that even now

unto us

a Child is born!