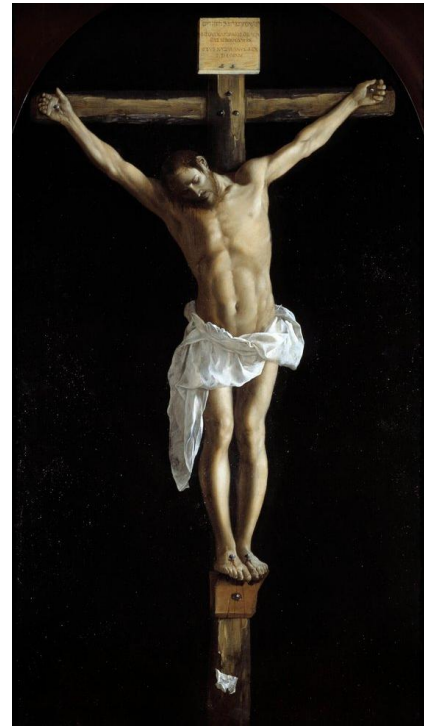


## A Reflection on Hope and Joy

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

*As for you also,  
because of the blood of my covenant with you,  
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.  
Return to the stronghold,  
O prisoners of hope;  
today I declare that I will restore to you double.*

Zechariah 9.9-12



The Prophet Zechariah exhorts us to *rejoice*, to be *joyful*. Notice that this is not simply a feeling of happiness, but something with a more spiritual quality – it is something which we can *choose*, even in the face of things which might otherwise incline us towards despondency. In this way ‘joy’ is similar to ‘hope’, a similarly spiritual outlook which is completely different from feeling *optimistic*: it is possible, and enormously valuable to others, when we are able to sustain hope in the face of things which seem dismal. In exactly the same way, it is possible to maintain joy even in the surroundings of oppression and dismay.

These are qualities of the kingdom of God, qualities pre-empting the completion of God’s work among us and within us. We are hopeful and joyful, not because everything is *fine* (it *isn’t*), but because we know that in the hands of God it will *become* fine. The moral and spiritual skill of mature faith is to hold together the frank recognition of how things really are, alongside the recognition of how they will yet be when they are ‘redeemed’ by God. We behold the meaning of Good Friday and of Easter Day *at the same time*.

So it is that the events of the Passion of the Lord impinge into today's readings: 'Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.' Immediately, we are transported to Palm Sunday, with its own combination of *majesty* and the preparation to *lament*. It is by the work of the Pascha – the combination of Christ's bearing of our sins on Good Friday and the renewing power of Easter Day – that God defies the powers of violence and evil, and opens the way back for us all into his embrace. In the vision of Zechariah, this is heralded as the cutting off of the battle-bow so that there will be instead genuine peace, and, because of the effects of God's 'blood covenant' with humanity, there will be freedom and restoration of what has been broken and oppressed. Zechariah sees this as the confirmation of hope, complementing the exhortation to be joyful, with which he began.

The process of atonement – the offering of himself as a sacrifice on our behalf by Jesus Christ to compensate for our own inability to make sufficient amends before God for our sins – is a great pivot around which the fulfilment of God's Creation as a whole hinges. And the calling of the prophets like Zechariah is to point this out; the calling of those of us who are the People of God is to place our hope and trust in the effectiveness of the process, that there may indeed be renewal and the completion of joy.

Hope and joy become in this way qualities which we choose to adopt, a stance and outlook inspired and guided by the way Jesus Christ – triumphant but humble (cf Philippians 2.5-11) – opens up for us a way back to God. We recognise this opening of renewed possibility, and therefore we can choose to be joyful and hopeful. They are not feelings, dependent on everything being cosy in the here and now, but *attitudes of soul*, dependent on the work which God continues to do openly and in secret in and around us.

The *vision* about which the prophets speak, then, is one of moral and spiritual resilience and stamina, made stronger by our own choice to be clothed in hope and in joy. This hope and this joy become the means by which God commends his promise that all which has so far been broken and distorted and weighed down upon will, in the fulness of time not only be restored, but restored *double*. May this indeed be so, as we commit ourselves afresh to the witness of hope and of joy. Thanks be to God.

The image of Jesus atoning for our sins on the cross is by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)