‘Golden hope of promise always kept’

It has been said that the wood of the cross was never far from the wood of the cradle. In December, we celebrated the birth of the Messiah. Now, in April, in Holy Week, we celebrate his death. Time goes even faster liturgically!

Yet, in truth, whether we live but a few hours or months of life, or have a blessing of years (to quote Cardinal Shehan), life is so short and so challenging for all of us. Ultimately, neither birth nor death have much meaning if there is no resurrection. And that’s the real meaning of Holy Week, for death and burial, grief and loss, are replaced by life and resurrection, joy and fullness of life!

Few people capture the birth and death of Jesus so well in so few words, as does School Sister of Notre Dame Enda Hughes, a retired nun at Villa Assumpta. Allow me to quote her poem, “The Mystery.”

“See how God has ungodded Himself,
His frailty asleep in our arms, needing us,
Knitting us to Him so that forever we could find Him
In the courage of the weak, and in the weakness of the great.

This One of Whom the prophets spoke
(Who bears the mortal wound)
will grow to know our beauty and the burden of our sin,
will die and rise…a golden hope of promise, always kept.
For love is wisdom, is mystery set free.”

What lovely lines. One of my favorites is: “See how God has ungodded himself.”

Sister echoes the words of St. Paul: “For He did not deem equality with God something to be clung to, but emptied himself, and assumed the condition of a slave, being born in the likeness of man. …”

What divine irony! We humans created in God’s image and likeness are redeemed by

a God born into time in our image and likeness. To save all of us God had to become like all of us.

What are we saved from? To answer practically, rather than theologically, we are saved from despair. As one spiritual writer bluntly put it: “All of us have enough pain to justify suicide!”

Most people who turn to suicide are simply trying to end the pain.

Yet in the life and death of Jesus, despair is defeated and senselessness finds sense! Looked at humanly, the life of Jesus seems horrible beyond comprehension: born into poverty; rejected in adulthood by civil and religious leaders; crucified by the soldiers of an occupying army!

And all Jesus did in his lifetime was to love, heal and forgive, and teach us how to love, heal and forgive. Why so much grief for a life that was so good? The only answer, of course, is that we learn that there is evil in the world, that we humans can make awful choices, and even in the name of God we can kill God.

That’s the dark side of life. Yet, Jesus revealed that he was willing to pass through the valley of darkness so that when we were in those dark valleys in our own lives we would know that we were not abandoned. The Good Shepherd would go into those dark valleys of depression and despair and carry us out!

Looking with human eyes, we humans cannot see beyond the grave. Looking with eyes of faith, we can see all the way to eternity. Because God took on all the worst that life could throw at him, we dare to believe that we can take on all that life can throw at us! There is life beyond life and a God waiting beyond death. There is a “golden hope of promise always kept.”