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Easter in Italy

It is all too easy to get used to the familiar liturgical patterns and symbolism of one's own tradition - Anglican for me - to the point where the impact can be lessened, since it is expected. The Easter story is as dramatic as it gets in Christianity, and it was hugely moving to experience it through the unfamiliar lens of Roman Catholicism in Italy recently. We found ourselves in St Peter's Square on Palm Sunday, where the Pope was addressing a huge audience of the faithful, commemorating the entry into Jerusalem of the Prince of Peace. The sight of hordes of joyful Catholics embraced by the curved colonnades of Bernini which spring outwards from St Peter's Basilica was a powerful reminder of the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross, which are both a reminder of his suffering, but also of his universal love.

Good Friday in Sorrento was as novel. A macabre procession of hundreds of men and boys wearing hooded, masked black gowns, and carrying solemnly artefacts symbolic of Holy Week - a scourge, a crown of thorns, ritual purification vessels, crosses - was followed by a statue of Jesus's bereft mother, Mary, raised aloft. It was disturbing, mysterious, and ultimately horrifying, as indeed Jesus's crucifixion must have been.

Back in England for the culmination of Holy Week, the celebration of Jesus's triumph over death and darkness through his resurrection, I had learned a powerful lesson about the value of experiencing other ways of expressing the same good news.