

Littlemore, Sunday July 17, 2005, Trinity 8

Genesis 28. 10-19a; Romans 8. 12-25; Matthew 13. 24-30, 36-43

'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly' (Romans 8. 22-23)

Not everyone here - self-evidently - has undergone labour pains; but those of us who have, retain between us, I think, a sort of secret bond which remains largely unspoken but refers in each case to an indelible mark left by the experience. It is very hard to explain the particular pain and mystery of childbirth; it can in any case be very different for different women and indeed for different births.

But there is one feature of it which is especially distinctive and extraordinary, and which Paul - remarkably for a man - makes the symbolic touchstone of this key chapter, chapter 8, in his letter to the Romans. In fact one might say he makes the image of childbirth the heart of his whole theology of prayer, of the Holy Spirit, and of how we become part of the life of Christ. That is important enough to spend a bit of time working out in detail.

As any mother knows, there comes a moment in labour when things hot up astonishingly and the internal propulsion towards the giving of birth becomes overwhelming; it is as if some huge, impersonal force within me is taking over, completely oblivious to my own sense of control or choice or agency. It is very frightening indeed, because up to this point I may have retained some fantasy that 'I am doing quite well: cooperating with the development of the process of labour, doing my breathing exercises and resting between contractions, as advised by the NCT classes and all the worthy textbooks on the matter. Or even if 'I haven't been doing well, I can at least exercise my agency and choice in demanding medication, or changing my position, or screaming at the top of my voice (as someone did in the adjoining bay when I was having my first baby).

But as this intense pressure towards new life overwhelms me I suddenly feel that my very selfhood is at risk of obliteration; as I lose control to this force, I would like to protest: 'Can we have a rest now, and start again next Tuesday?' But it is too late; for good or ill, this baby is coming, and its coming is on the wave of a life-force so immense that it seems to obliterate my own life, my own very existence.

Now life and death are contending: the baby's life and my seeming loss of life, loss of selfhood. It is hard to explain but it is like being swept away by a tidal wave or run over by a juggernaut; and it renders one speechless, because it is so powerful that even words and imagination fail. One's very selfhood is displaced. Strange, wordless groans come forth as if from someone else - not screams because there is no energy for those now; in Paul's words, these are 'the inward groanings', or as he puts it later, the 'sighs too deep for words' that signal the coming forth of new life in Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

Fortunately, it is very difficult to remember the pain and impact of labour after the event with any clarity; and this is doubtless merciful. I for one would rather not remember it too vividly. But one has to remember and grasp enough of its force to know and understand what Paul is saying here, in Romans, about prayer and its difficulty, about prayer and loss of control to the Spirit so that Christ's life may be born in one.

It might seem odd to say that all prayer is, at base, like this crucial dimension of the experience of labour: loss of control, loss of rational speech, loss of ordinary selfhood even. Yet there is something deeply reassuring here too in what Paul says; for if we feel that we cannot pray, or don't know what to ask for, or cannot think of anything pious to say in words, or that the God we are trying to address is off the map of anything we can control, then - according to Paul here - we must be on the right track. Like the overwhelming power of the life-force in labour, the Holy Spirit in us is, we find, what really does the praying, not us offering nicely-prepared speeches, or good-hearted plans for improving the world; these thoughts dissolve into meaninglessness or incoherence as the Spirit takes over and we can do nothing other than 'groan inwardly'.

What this means is that the prayer that seems least effective humanly or even a miserable failure - prayer at the end of my tether, prayer that collapses into silence or inarticulacy - is the best prayer, according to Paul, because it gives place to the Holy Spirit's work in us; it gives place, and so enables the Spirit to turn us more and more into the likeness of Christ, to become authentic children too of the 'Father'. Just as in the crisis of labour the mother feels that she is 'losing it', being obliterated for the sake of the new life coursing through her, so with the Spirit: only give place to it, and what seems like loss or death can become the very means of new life.

According to Paul, it is not only we Christians who are 'groaning' in the Spirit in prayer as we are forged into the likeness of Christ, but the whole creation. Paul gives us a picture of the entire cosmos being transformed, in the same way, by the yearning and longing for Christ that the Spirit fires in us. It is a whole world, for Paul, an ecology, propelled towards a consummation and a new birth; and the Spirit animates it all. That may seem to us now fantastical. But the key for us, today, now, in thinking our way into this picture of the world, is the crucial handing over of the reigns of control that the Spirit demands of us. Frightening, disconcerting, painful and transformative: prayer that dares to say 'Yes' to a Spirit that blows where it wills is all those things.

It is prayer that ceases to set the agenda, prayer that takes time to wait or listen or simply groan without known meaning. And what seems overwhelming and inexpressible and fearful, as in labour, can then propel us inexorably towards what the German medieval mystic Meister Eckhart called 'the birth of Christ in the soul'.

'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains', says Paul. These, then, are labour pains for all, not just for us mothers who might rather care to forget them. They are the labour pains that constitute the very stuff of the Christian life, the inarticulate groanings of those who pray for the world's transformation, and yearn for the Spirit to birth us into Christ. Let us then make place for that Spirit in our prayers, however helpless and inarticulate such an effort seems; let us learn that what feels like 'failed' human prayer can be the precious stuff of the Spirit's mysterious work in us; and let us rejoice in that disconcerting loss of control, that painful obliteration of the 'old self' that the Spirit brings, as our new selves in Christ come to birth. Amen.