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**Birth-Pangs** (John 16. 16-24)

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We are moving towards the end of the liturgical season of Easter. On Thursday this coming week, the church celebrates the Ascension – when Jesus is ‘lifted up’ into heaven (whatever exactly that means) and his post-resurrection bodily appearances cease.

Over this season of Easter, at Benedictus, we’ve been exploring aspects of the new possibilities for being that Jesus’ death and resurrection opens up. We looked at how resurrection means our world is no longer enclosed by, hedged about by death – and how this is actually a pretty disorienting experience (remember the frightened women running from the open tomb in Mark’s gospel). We looked at how the capacity to perceive and relate to this new reality needs to be developed and practised – all those stories of Jesus not being recognised by the disciples. On Anzac Day, we read of Peter encountering Jesus by the lake in Galilee, and reflected how resurrection makes possible the healing even of the past, of memory. Last week we focused on this hospitable, life-bestowing reality as a place we can now abide, dwell in, live from. God is not somewhere *else* we are trying to get. The risen Jesus manifests the truth of the reality in which we already are. He reveals it to be compassionate, forgiving, accepting love, and invites us to entrust ourselves and each other to it.

This week, our reading has Jesus speak of what the disciples can expect as they undergo the transition from the old reality to the new, what they might experience. It’s a kind of ‘heads up’ so they don’t fall apart when the going gets tough: ‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling’ he says a bit

earlier in the gospel. It seems to me that we too need to hear this 'heads up', if we are to keep faith with our own journeys of transformation, our own transition from lives colonised by death and alienation, to the freedom and joy of resurrection life.

Our reading comes from the Farewell Discourses in John's gospel. John imagines Jesus preparing his disciples for what is to come: his death – 'A little while, and you will no longer see me ... you will weep and mourn'; and his resurrection – 'again, a little while and you will see me ... your pain will turn into joy'. And John evokes what the disciples' experience of this transition will be with the striking image of giving birth: 'When a woman is in labour she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world'.

A powerful feature of this image is that the shift from pain to joy is experienced not just as a switch – first this, now that. That would be to have the pain and the joy on the same level. Instead we're talking about the kind of shift where what happened before is relativised. In the light of the joy of bringing a child to birth, the pain undergone is able to be held, remembered differently.

I haven't known the pain or the joy of childbirth, but this image certainly rings true for me in my experiences of major life transition. When some part of my life, some way of being is coming to an end, in the midst of the accompanying resistance, grief or turmoil, pain is all I am present to. But when somehow I have lived through this ending, this death, then I discover my whole life emerging on a different footing. The pain and confusion has now become part of something else, a bigger story, a new life and identity, and so it is remembered differently. It has been integrated, rather than simply survived.

Of course, it's not that I would have chosen or wished for it to be that way. But since it *was* the way that led to here, it can somehow be accepted – even, in a strange way, something to be thankful for. This is how a mother remembers the pain

that accompanies the birth of her child. This, promises Jesus, is the way the disciples will remember the pain of receiving the new identities, the new reality he is bringing into being. It will somehow be part of the gift.

A second and, I think, profoundly significant feature of this image of birth-pangs is the way it points to an 'undergoing', a necessary passivity in what is happening. Of course, it calls for participation. A mother is utterly engaged in the labour of bearing her child, and from a long time before the moment of birth. But when, as the text says, 'her hour has come', when the baby is underway, well – there's no going back. It's happening, it has its own timing and must take its course. This is the place the disciples too will find themselves. Some unstoppable process is unleashed as Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem. Both he and they must undergo what is being brought to birth through the events of Easter, now 'the fullness of time has come'.

And this too rings true for me in relation to our experiences of transition. They don't come from nowhere – there's a context, a hinterland which forms and precipitates them. But as they really get underway – there's part of them that just needs to be undergone, suffered, lived through. We participate as best we can, we try to breathe in a helpful way, we push or don't push – but actually, something is taking its course. Our choice, finally, is to keep faith with it or not, to let it happen or not.

As we've seen over these past few weeks, hearing the news of Jesus' resurrection, beginning to glimpse the new possibilities for being it opens up, is a surprisingly painful transition for the disciples. There's a lot they have to let go, most obviously the security of obscurity. Really, it seems, they'd quite like just to slink away, fade back into their old lives as fishermen. And there's a lot that remains unclear about the future – what will it mean for their relationship to their religious identity and community? What might being true to this good news of divine life and compassion cost them, in a social world utterly defined by oppressive hierarchy and

enforced by the power to wield death? Even so, Jesus promises, if they can keep faith with it, the pain of this disorienting, dangerous reconfiguration of their identities will ultimately be relativised by a joy that no one can take away from them.

It's the same for us. If we are really to receive what is made possible by the resurrection – the healing of memory, liberation from evasive, avoidant, self-protective ways of being, confidence to entrust our lives joyfully to God – then we too have things to let go, things to acknowledge. We too must suffer the confusion and disorientation of that process, including perhaps the disapproval or misunderstanding of those around us. We too must be responsive to the timing of things – listening for when 'the hour has come' – allowing something new to come to birth in and through us.

And so I wonder, what is it for us, for me and you, this Easter? What is God, cleverly disguised as your life, moving you towards? What is blocking your receiving fullness of life – perhaps a way of being in control, a habit of suppressing some part of yourself that you fear to own or embrace, a story about your life that is tired and in the way? We can't transform these things on our own, or decide on the timing ourselves. But we can consent to the way of undergoing, opening ourselves to grace working in and through us as it brings new life to birth.

And maybe that is the clue to the final, rather obscure lines of our reading. 'Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete'. To ask in Jesus' name, is to ask as he would ask – to ask according to his way. The way is the way of death and resurrection, dying into life. If we truly ask to be transformed, Jesus promises, we *will* receive – and our joy will be complete.