

2 April 2021

**Labour Pains (John 18. 28-19.37)**

*Good Friday*

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*[Jesus said] 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me ... Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. 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'. (John 16. 16, 20-21)*

These words come from the part of John's gospel known as the Farewell Discourses in which Jesus gives his final teaching and tries to prepare his disciples for his death, to give them keys for understanding its meaning. Only here is it recorded that Jesus offers childbirth as a metaphor for their experience of his Passion, the pain of labour for the anguish of crucifixion. It's a metaphor that opens, I think, profoundly significant dimensions of the paschal mystery.

In the passion narratives of Mark and Matthew, even Luke, Jesus' physical and psychological suffering is intense. He's mocked and cruelly beaten, taunted and humiliated – not only by the soldiers, but by the leaders of the people, the passers-by and even those crucified with him. To the extent that anyone stays with him, it's the women – but in these accounts they are 'standing at a distance'. On the Cross, he is alone and (in Mark and Matthew at least) feels himself abandoned even by God.

John's gospel doesn't wholly contradict this picture. Death by crucifixion is necessarily agonising and demeaning, and during his 'trial' the soldiers mock and strike him, dress him in a crown of thorns. All the same, it is less intense. The crowds and bystanders don't add to his agony; there's no abuse from those strung up beside him, and his mother and his beloved disciples – Mary and John – remain with him, standing near the cross. Whereas the other gospels emphasise Jesus' extended undergoing of pain and rejection as something like an absorbing of the world's

darkness, a lancing of the sore of human violence, here the suffering that he and those who love him undergo is more generative, the necessary corollary of bringing new life into the world. It's not the pain but the birthing that really matters here. That's where this gospel wants to fix our gaze.

And this sense of something being accomplished, something new coming to be, is reinforced by John's placing of events in relation to the Passover festival. This festival, you'll remember, celebrates the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt and its formation as a people. In the other gospels, the Passover meal is shared by Jesus and his disciples prior to his death. It's the occasion of the institution of the Lord's Supper. In John, though, Jesus is crucified on the day *before* the Passover – the day of Preparation. He is crucified outside the city, at the same time as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered by the priests inside the temple. It's as though in and through him a new Passover is being prepared, a new passage forged. By his death, he is generating liberation and a new humanity.

What does this mean? On John's account, it has to do with our coming to share the same radical and abiding union with God that Jesus enjoys. The same peace and joy. Why does this require Jesus' death? Well – think about what blocks our union with God, what stops us being totally open and responsive to the One Jesus calls 'Father'.

There's our instinct for self-preservation, exercised often at others' expense. There's our tendency to cling to illusions of our own goodness, our reluctance to see the truth of our motivations and justifications. There's our attachment to the glory and success on offer in this world, because that's what makes us OK and gives our lives meaning. These ways of being seem just part and parcel of human nature, in some sense hardwired. And yet, according to Jesus, they are incongruent with the being of God, because God is self-expending not self-preserving, God is truth, and God's kingdom is not of this world. If we're to be joined with God, truly to enjoy God, then something deep has to shift in us. Some way of being ourselves must be remade.

Jesus has spent his life to enable this. He's *spoken* of God's being, telling stories, inventing analogies; he's *enacted* God's being, showing mercy, unveiling illusion. But the telling and enacting only take you so far. In the end what has to be forged in us is the capacity to entrust ourselves wholly to this reality, so that we may be sourced in God rather than self-securing. And since it's fear of death, fear of shame, rejection and disillusionment that ultimately drives all our self-securing ways of being, this is what must be undergone in order to break its power over us. It's Jesus' unbroken connection to God *through* suffering and death that creates trust in us and makes a way for us. This is how we too may come to be sourced in and joined to God, 'born again', 'born from above'.

In John's vision, this coming to be of a new and renewed humanity is already beginning to be realised at the foot of the cross, by those who have laboured faithfully with him. As his labour is ending, Jesus calls it forth. 'When [he] saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your Son". Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother"'. Timothy Radcliffe writes, Jesus 'does not call Mary "Mother". He says "Woman". This is because she is the new Eve ... the mother of all who live by faith'. This new Eve is the adoptive mother of a son – and thereby is begun a new kind of human family, the household of God, in which all of us are brothers and sisters, children of the one Father.

As for us ... well, we too are gathered at the foot of the cross. Longing for joy, peace, the radical union with God and with all people that Jesus knew, and that he lived and died to share with us. We are here, perhaps fearful of what is asked or offered, perhaps doubting God or ourselves, perhaps struggling to bear with our own or the world's pain. But the truth is, this Passover is accomplished, 'it is finished'; the way is made. The invitation now is to entrust ourselves to it, to set foot upon it, so that, as he promises all who undergo this labour of faith, we may know his joy and our joy may be complete.