

GIVING BIRTH

By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

UNLESS ONE is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God' (Jn 3,3). With these words Jesus establishes birth as a key description of the beginnings of the life of grace. But unless we understand birth, how can we explore the riches of the analogy? Unless we learn from the experiences of those who have gone through the long, painful but ecstatic event of giving birth, how can we know how true it is to call conversion to Christ a rebirth? How can we gain the confidence to enter fully into the labour pains of our faith, with a more than theoretical knowledge that suffering is life-giving and a pathway to the new creation? In this article I shall speak about the different stages in a woman's experience of conceiving, bearing and giving birth to a child, so that I can move from the physical experience of birth to an analogous interpretation of the spiritual experience of rebirth. (My focus of attention will be primarily on how the experience of having babies brings meaning to christian belief, rather than on how christian belief brings meaning to the experience of having babies. I have already written about the latter at length in my book *God and motherhood* — while in this journal of spirituality the former emphasis seems more appropriate).

Inbuilt longing

Women are made for giving birth, and have an inbuilt longing to make full use of the bodies they have been given — to have a child grow within their womb, to be able to give milk from their breasts — even though for some women the desire is never fully awakened, for other women never at all. Many single women never consciously long for a child. Even some mothers never feel any attraction towards breast feeding. But once the desire for these physical experiences is awakened it is profound and undeniable, and childlessness is a cause of rightful and terrible grief. Happily the most common trigger for the desire is the maturing of a loving relationship with a life partner. There comes a point in a marriage when the development of love between the couple calls for expression in the form of children, and it may be at this moment that the woman first becomes aware of how strong is her physical desire for a baby. Other women, sometimes single women, may become acutely aware of this longing

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as they reach their late thirties, and know that time is running out. Still others may only realize how much these physical events mean to them when they have actually been through the pregnancy and birth.

We can see here a vivid physical parallel to humanity's inbuilt longing for God. 'You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you', writes Augustine on the first page of the *Confessions*. 'As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God', writes the psalmist (Ps 42,1). And yet we have to acknowledge the fact that many people deny they have such a longing within them, and manage to function quite happily and successfully in complete unawareness of their need for God. Like a woman who does not desire a child, they do not desire God; and yet we believe that if we dig deep enough that longing is truly there to be found. They must desire God, because they have been made that way. It is not a question of arguing them into desiring God, but of permitting that existing desire to awaken in its own way and in its own time. 'I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please' (Cant 8,4).

Secret beginnings

By the time a mother-to-be is aware of the child in her womb it has already been there some considerable time. Pregnancy tests are always being improved, but as yet a woman cannot know she has conceived a child until two to three weeks after conception. Of course it is much longer — more than three months later — before a woman can actually feel her child's fairy-like movements, and have in this way her first conscious contact with the baby through the sense of touch. The new being is there long before we know it. Indeed so gradual and hidden are its beginnings that it is extremely difficult to know at what point we can say even in theory that there is a baby present at all. Much of the abortion discussion has centred on this question. Is a human being present from conception, from implantation at around seven days after fertilization, from the moment when splitting to form identical twins is no longer a possibility, from the formation of the rudimentary brain in the sixth week of pregnancy, from the completion of all the parts of the body towards the thirteenth week, from quickening around the eighteenth week, or from birth itself? If we want to be on the safe side we will respect the foetus as a human being from conception, but it is impossible to establish beyond doubt that a human being is present

from that moment. But even if we did know in theory, we would still not know in practice, at what point a new human person has been made. The new being comes into existence and grows imperceptibly and secretly.

If we compare this gradual and hidden growth with the growth of the new being in Christ — the growth of supernatural life within the soul — we find a similar phenomenon. Let us consider the case of the adult convert approaching baptism. Her baptism, like the baby's birth, is the moment of public welcoming and acknowledgment. That is the day on which we can say with confidence: 'she is born again of water and the Holy Spirit'. But behind that undeniable, publicly acknowledged moment, lies a hidden life of gradual growth. Is the 'new being' present in that convert only from baptism, or from the moment of personal decision to be baptized? Or, further back, from the first moments of honest and conscientious searching? Is there a point at which we can say this person as yet *knows* so little about the faith and it is not yet possible for her to *have* faith? The analogy of foetal growth is a reminder of how precious is the long period of hidden becoming. There is a time when God sees what we cannot yet know, and that is the time when there may already be a new being in us of which we are unaware. If as Christians we want to reverence new life in the womb from its first ambiguous dot-like beginnings, giving always the benefit of the doubt to the fertilized ovum out of respect for creation, we can learn a similar reverence for the beginnings of the spiritual life. We can learn to respect what is as yet unrecognizable, in the belief that God may be slowly forming it according to the divine plan, and that every slow moment of its growth is indispensable and precious in the eyes of the Lord. The kingdom of heaven 'is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches' (Lk 13,19). It is not just that the kingdom of heaven (or the 'new being' in Christ) can grow out of a tiny seed, but that in that tiny seed the kingdom (or 'new being') is already present.

Fear and trust

During a pregnancy a woman can feel many strong and conflicting emotions. She is committed to leading a life of love with another person whom she has not yet even seen. Although she hopes and justifiably expects to love her child she cannot help knowing that she is already embarked on a course that can only be made sense of by a

love that she does not yet possess. There is no very profound sense in which you can already love a being known only through a kick in the tummy. You may have longing and hope and trust, but that is not, or not yet, love. And every mother knows that she must run a small risk of giving birth to a handicapped child, and she harbours doubts as to whether she would be able to or would wish to respond fully to that challenge.

Fears in the spiritual life are not dissimilar. Once we have made a commitment to Christ, and been baptized into his death, we have accepted a risk that cannot be measured. We cannot know the demands God will make of us, the burdens he will place on us or the precious gifts or loved ones that he might take away. Once we have committed ourselves to Christ we cannot stand back and say 'This, or this, you may ask, but that is too much'. We can only have faith that the kind of life to which he will call us will be made happy by love. We cannot avoid anxiety and fear, but in the face of it we can only trust that 'all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well'. We can learn not to over-dramatize remote chances of disaster — as the mother's chances of having a handicapped child is a remote one — but we cannot cope with the fear by pretending that the dangers are non-existent. Learning to place our trust in God is like learning to cope with pregnancy: we learn to be serene in the presence of both hope and fear; we learn to accept a new and unknown life while waiting upon love.

Inexplicable waste

Many pregnancies end in miscarriage. It is not an experience I have had, but I have been told that while some women easily recover from it, for others it is really felt as the loss of a child and brings deep and long-term grief. It is very difficult to understand why God can allow something wonderful — as wonderful as a human being — to be started, and then cut it short. As outsiders to the experience we prefer to think of a miscarriage as something good that did not manage to happen, rather than as something good that was brutally destroyed: it is less disturbing that way. Despite our theoretical reverence for foetal life, our inclination is to congratulate those who have managed to cope philosophically with the experience of miscarriage, not those who have succeeded in finding deep and inconsolable grief there. For one woman I know, it was not the 'kick in the tummy' that she mourned for, but the bloody and still wriggling mess in a bucket that she was briefly allowed to see.

Needless waste is always a problem in our self-understanding before God. In a miscarriage there is not only the supreme waste of a human life, but also the waste of a great deal of physical and mental effort in the course of the pregnancy. The woman may have undergone a lot of morning sickness or physical debilitation; she may also have used up a lot of time and emotional energy in coming to terms with her pregnancy and making plans for the future. It so often happens that we put a lot of time and effort into something that is undeniably good, and that seems very clearly the way God is steering us and the work he wants us to do, and then all crashes to bits and seems wasted. Despite our theories of unconditional trust in God we may be hit very hard by a sense of anger at the apparent capriciousness of the divine plan. The crucifixion of Jesus is of course the supreme instance of inexplicable waste, but within our own lives the death of a child — before or after birth — is probably the most intense experience of wastefulness that can be faced.

Sense of heightened reality

As the pregnancy nears its end the woman moves into a period of increased anxiety and restlessness, illumined, however, with much hope. It becomes difficult to concentrate on anything except the coming birth, unless by way of distraction. In general, however, much she has enjoyed her pregnancy or however anxious she is about the birth, the woman's overriding wish at this stage is to get on with the labour and get it over with. 'I came to cast fire upon the earth; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!' (Lk 12,50). Birth is as inevitable as death: there is no other way out of pregnancy than by giving birth, whether by normal labour or by caesarian section. This obvious truth strikes a woman with vivid force as she nears the moment that has to be faced. Psychological factors can, occasionally, bring on or delay labour (a midwife who had worked throughout the war told me that no woman ever gave birth during an air-raid: even if she was in labour the contractions would stop) just as they can bring on or delay death. But there can be no negotiation about the inevitability of either birth or death. Normal life and human wishes and needs (the need to sleep, the needs of older children, the need to eat, the need to earn money) must bow to the unrestrainable hand of God that moves in, delivering pain and disrupting human existence, giving the world another person, or taking one away. There is a sense of increased reality about these moments, when the normal rhythms of day and night,

work and food and sleep, are split open to make way for the author of life to pass. Little wonder that it is the birthday we celebrate as the moment of beginning, although the baby outside the womb and the baby inside the womb differ only in the nature of their environment and in their source of oxygen and nourishment. The human experience of the gift of life comes at the moment of birth, whatever the metaphysics are.

It is difficult to describe to someone who has not undergone labour, how overwhelming the experience is. The contractions sweep over the woman like great waves, and from the centre of her body engulf her whole being with their power. While natural childbirth techniques are very effective in teaching how to control pain, it is a mistake to think that that means the pain will not be there. In my experience the pain was greater than I had imagined, and, in subsequent births, greater than I had remembered. It is only because human life is a gift beyond any measuring that the pain of giving birth becomes acceptable. When a woman has seen and loved her baby, she knows that there is nothing in the world — no degree of pain or sacrifice — of which she could say 'This child would not be worth that'.

It is trite to observe that life is full of little births and little deaths, that for something worthwhile we may have to suffer and sacrifice. It is true, of course, but the 'real thing' — real birth, real death — is something that knocks all these practice events for six. No amount of theory about the worth of struggle or the joy of life can stand next to the naked experience. Giving birth is an experience that can enlighten the rest of life with its memories of joy, love and meaning, but it will always enlighten them by standing above them, beyond them, on a level of reality to which ordinary life will never attain. It is a level of reality on which God stands and to which a human person may occasionally be called, briefly, to glimpse the mysteries of life and of death.

Those moments of heightened reality may be found in the spiritual life as well as in the physical events of birth and death. But such moments are privileged moments, and rare moments, and we fall into a kind of blasphemy to think we can extend them at our will. A vision is a vision if it cannot be doubted, or, rather, if it remains untouched when submitted to doubt. Many of the accounts in the Religious Experience Research Unit, Oxford, record the dual quality of one part of the mind enjoying the vision, while the other part looks on incredulously.¹

The quality of incredulity is very much present for the mother at birth. Although inductive knowledge and the assurances of the medical staff leave no doubt that what she will give birth to is a human baby, her mind cannot yet fully encompass this expectation. Her imagination cannot project in advance something as wonderful as what actually appears. A baby has individuality and personhood as well as the endearing qualities of vulnerability, littleness, softness and warmth. No one is better able to see the loveability of the new baby's personhood than the mother, and yet although she must have expected to love her baby, that love always takes her by surprise. She may feel 'I did not imagine she would be as lovely as this', or 'I never could really believe that by now I would have a baby of my own' or sentiments such as these. They are not to be attributed to unnecessary self-doubt, but to the full wonder of God's loving creation of humankind, which surpasses all understanding. Incredulity, awe, amazement, reverence, the fulfilment of hope beyond all expectation . . . these are the responses of the mother when she sees and loves the new child that God has made and given her.

Contemplation

When the baby has been born it is put in the mother's arms for her to hold and look at. Holding and looking absorb her attention now, while her body is passively subjected to medical staff, who inject her, deliver the placenta and clean her up. But amidst the busy activities of all around her, the mother and her baby rest in a private island of mutual contemplation. All the senses play their part here: the mother is most aware of the fact of *seeing* her baby for the first time, and will spend literally hours of the early days just gazing in loving amazement at her child, while the baby, though aware of sights and noises, has not yet learned to 'read' these new experiences, but relates more easily to the mother through the more familiar sense of touch. Soon — after perhaps half an hour — taste comes into play as the mother puts the child to her breast for the first time; the child latches on and sucks by a natural reflex, and so the mother and baby begin to enter into a close and privileged form of physical union, in which the mother gives love, comfort and nourishment as she gives of herself.

No more perfect image could be found of contemplative prayer. In the prayer of 'simple regard' (or 'just looking') we let ourselves be held in God's arms and looked at lovingly. We look back, and like the new baby we may not see very much or understand much of

what we see. But from time to time we may begin to taste the sweetness of the Lord, in the image St Teresa was so fond of using: 'the soul should realize that it is in his company, and should merely drink the milk which his majesty puts into its mouth and enjoy its sweetness'.² If we have a niggling suspicion that a quiet contemplative awareness may be as boring for God as we fear it will be for ourselves, we can reflect how rich and satisfying the experience is for the human mother and child. That reflection may give us the confidence to discover ourselves in great simplicity as loved children of God. 'Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord' (1 Pet 2,2-3).

Summary and conclusion

If such is the wonder of creation, then what can we say of the new creation in Christ? 'Almighty and eternal God, you created all things in wonderful beauty and order. Help us now to perceive how still more wonderful is the new creation . . .' runs the prayer in the Easter Vigil after the creation account. If even the first creation surpasses our understanding, what can we say of the new birth? If even the creation of a human child awakens restless longing, hidden mystery, fear and anxiety, pain and exhaustion, joy, wonder and contemplative love, then what can we expect in the creation of what is not just a child of man and woman but a child of God? In our struggle to become new beings, reborn in Christ through the power of the Spirit, we must be ready to face even more longing and mystery, fear and anxiety, pain and exhaustion, joy, wonder and contemplative love. 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved' (Rom 8,22-24).

NOTES

¹ See Cohen J. M. and Phipps, J. F.: *The common experience* (London, 1979), pp 11-13, 22.

² St Teresa of Avila: 'Book called way of perfection', in ch xxxi, in *Complete works, vol II*, ed. E. Allison Peers (London, 1963).