

“Birth Pangs”
(Romans 8.12-25)

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Introduction: Paul’s Perspective on the World

I was on holiday in Cairns when it was announced that North Korea had successfully tested an intercontinental missile, capable of delivering a nuclear warhead as far as the west coast of the USA. The breathless front-page headline in the local newspaper the next day was as predictable as it was funny... *“Nuclear Bomb – Cairns in Reach!”* Which *is* true in terms of distance, but doesn’t consider *why* North Korea might use its limited nuclear arsenal to wipe out little Cairns! It isn’t a rational threat – it simply pushes the terror button... *‘It could be us!’*

Entirely predictable... for such is our current appetite of fear that the media knows such stories sell papers and attracts viewers. Something about our society means we’re prone to see threat and disaster at every turn. I might laugh at my North Queensland ‘cousins’, but I know that same fear within myself... I often come away from a news broadcast – full of war, crime, corruption and instability... seemingly *everywhere* – feeling quite unsettled. *‘The whole world’s in such a mess! Where will it all end? What will happen to us?’*

But the Apostle Paul has a very different perspective...

“All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain (and strife) throughout the world are simply birth pangs.” (22-3)

It’s an alternative perspective based on faith – faith that the world, indeed *all* creation, is held in the love of the Creator God. That hidden to our eyes is the purpose and destiny of creation – all things, all life, moving inexorably to the great and glorious fulfilment that is God’s intention. What we’re tempted to see as strife, disaster and threat, faith sees through the metaphor of pregnancy and labour. Something wonderful is coming to birth in the midst of all this pain and struggle. These are *“simply birth pangs”!*

Paul’s Perspective On Our Lives

And Paul says we can apply this same perspective – of *something beautiful coming to birth* – to our own lives.

“The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within.” (23)

How *do* you look at your own life? Many of us are conditioned to view ourselves negatively – to see our struggles as failures, our confusions as weakness or stupidity... our mistakes as shameful humiliations. Too many of us conclude... *‘I’m hopeless! I’ve made a real mess of my life. I should have done better.’*

But Paul, applying the same faith to our personal lives, pronounces our struggles, our pain... the difficult and messy times... as *birth pangs*... labour pains... as the Spirit brings forth the wonderful fulfilment, of the unique gift of God that each and every one of us is.

Try it on for size... How does it feel... to see your self – including all that you’d call struggle, confusion, messes, mistakes, wrong choices – as an emerging life of wonder, beauty and delight?

But there’s more...

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

In a feast of riches, today we also receive the fabulous Jesus parable of *The Wheat and the Weeds*...

Jesus says, *‘Imagine life like this...*

It’s like a field that’s been planted with good seed. But when the crop comes up, to everyone’s dismay, it’s a mess of weeds as well as wheat! Life’s like that... To our eyes it’s full of imperfection... it’s a mess... not what we expected or wanted it to be. And our first impulse is to ‘make it’ perfect. To sort it out... get rid of the weeds – the struggle, the failure, the pain, the confusion, the mess – so that it looks how it’s supposed to look. And so in our story, our imaginary field, the farm workers come to the owner and say, “Look boss – it’s a disaster! Something’s gone terribly wrong. Give us the word and we’ll get stuck in there and sort it all out – we’ll make it neat, pristine, perfect... like it should be.

But to their surprise the boss says... "Leave it alone. Let the wheat and the weeds, the perfection and the imperfection, grow alongside one another for now. Because what we can see at present is limited. You won't necessarily be able to see the difference – between what's going to produce a harvest in the long term, and what will end up as discarded rubbish for the fire. So let it go – we'll only do damage if we try to perfect it here and now. Any judgement will only be made at the very end... and it won't be you who makes that decision anyway."

It's a fabulous parable! How do we look at the world... how do we read our own lives? Of course there's struggle, pain, confusion and imperfection. But all life is God's... all life (including you and me) is part of the seamless flow of creative love that we call God.

In humility – that is, a sane appreciation of our limited vision – we learn to accept that our perception is never totally clear. Indeed in our culture, it is often distorted towards fear, threat and negative judgement. We shouldn't even expect to be able to understand what's going on a lot of the time.

In faith, we trust that God is bringing all creation to fulfilment... and that what we experience as pain and struggle, is the transition of labour as something wonderful is being brought to birth.

Conclusion

I was on holiday when I sat with these texts – warmth, sunshine, the soothing crash of the waves, and a delicious breeze rustling the beauty of the tropical vegetation. It was a fertile environment to hear the voice of grace...

You see... so much of *my* life has felt like struggle... indeed an endless striving to be perfect, to be someone more than I am. I've so often read the world as threat, and myself as '*not good enough*'. Through these texts of Holy Scripture, I heard the voice of grace speaking gently to me... '*But dear Grantley... life's not like that at all. Open your eyes and have another look; see the wonder of it all.*'

And I couldn't help but think of the gentle counsel given by the 20th century Christian mystic, Teilhard de Chardin...

*“Above all, trust in the slow work of God,
We are, quite naturally,
impatient in everything to reach the end
without delay.
We should like to skip
the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown,
something new,
and yet it is the law of all progress
that it’s made by passing through
some stages of instability –
and that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually –
let them grow,
let them shape themselves,
without undue haste.
Don’t try to force them on,
as though you could be today
what time,
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will),
will make you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of
feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”*

The Apostle Paul says,

*“I don’t think there’s any comparison between the present hard times and the coming
good times. The created world can hardly wait for what’s coming next.” (18)*