

WHEN BIRTH AND DEATH COME TOGETHER: THE RIGHT RITE?

David Hamilton

There is a widespread and persistent belief that Christian theology supplies us with all the basic theory we will ever need for faithful and effective witness and action, and that all we have to do is to read off the right theory and then apply it to the situation. What are we to do however when we encounter situations for which there is no obvious answer? That oversimplified theory-to-practice view misses the point of what theology is and always has been. It is not that the wisdom of the past is irrelevant today. It is a matter of recognising what kind of wisdom it is, and how we can best make use of it. This is the task of 'practical theology' - to generate a critical conversation between the tradition we inherit and the complex situations we find ourselves in. It is a conversation that arises precisely because the situation is asking new questions of us for which the tradition as it stands has no ready-made answers.

Though this may seem a very post-modern situation it is in fact not new at all. The Bible is largely an account of how prophets and priests, apostles and teachers, in the history of Israel and of the early church, again and again rethought, reinterpreted and reminded the tradition they had received from the past so that it could speak compellingly and prophetically to quite new circumstances. That has been happening ever since: indeed we could say that this rethinking and recasting actually is the tradition we have entered into. All theology is, fundamentally, practical theology.

Although there have of course been periods of relative quiet in the history of Christianity, there have also been periods of immense upheaval and social change - and we as it happens are in the midst of one. As a result, the church finds itself at the interface between the Faith, the great Christian 'givens', and situations which were unthinkable in the worlds from which that faith first emerged. Hospital chaplains are among those who work at one such interface. Their daily world in healthcare is a place of spectacular innovation and ingenuity, where the miracles 20 or 30 years ago have become the routine of today, and so where patients arrive with expectations, indeed demands, unimagined by their mothers and fathers a short generation ago.

The paradox is that the more we extend the boundaries of technical possibility the more acute become the sadness, the anger, even the guilt, people feel when something goes wrong. The more that is made possible and safe in, for example, a maternity unit the deeper may be the sense of failure and distress when the longed-for pregnancy does not happen, or the long-awaited child is born handicapped, or the expected baby is stillborn. In this turn-of-the-century world we are encountering new and searching questions which call for theological and pastoral improvisation and a critical and responsible practical theology. This is not just making things up as we go along: it is playing our proper part in the tradition we have inherited.

The situation that this conference is considering is like this - it asks new questions of an old tradition, and it is not immediately clear how we can best respond to them. In 1997, of just over 59,000 births in Scotland, 319 (5.3:1000) were registered as stillbirths, defined as babies born after the 24th week 'who did not breathe or show any other sign of life'. (*Scottish Stillbirth and Infant Death Report*, 1997.) In addition there were 147 neonatal deaths (2.5:1000), that is of babies within the first week of birth. The official statistics then record a total of 466 perinatal deaths (7.8:1000), but a significant number of deliveries take place before the 24th week, and these too may be cases when the chaplain may become involved, as with a baby stillborn at a later stage.

Behind these statistics lie major attitudinal changes. Not so long ago a stillborn foetus was simply removed and disposed of. The grief of the mother was scarcely recognised, or if it was, a time to mourn was scarcely thought necessary. Still less were the feelings of the father considered. Not so long ago the stillborn foetus had no distinctive identity, except as a formal statistic, and often was neither given nor remembered by a name. Now however the situation is very different. We know much more about loss and mourning, and we are more ready to acknowledge its power, both to disable and to heal the human spirit. Now not only technical skill but ethical shifts have encouraged society to think differently about the unborn, and so also about the stillborn.

Into this new landscape of hope and grief, of anticipation and defeat, of a confusion of feelings that only a sophisticated age could generate, comes the chaplain, the one it is thought who will surely have the right words, the right insights, the right comforting suggestions, perhaps the right rite. Some will want simply a few words, a silent presence, a holding hand; some will want a funeral. Some however will want something else first, a ritual that does not simply acknowledge a death but actually acknowledges a birth. A chaplain knows what to do when a baby is born alive but seriously struggling: if the parents ask for baptism, the chaplain probably baptizes. We may or may not be sure what the parents think baptism does, but we may decide that that is not really the point. But when birth and death come together...? What about baptism here? In churches which practise infant baptism, this is the rite by which we celebrate the love of God for the newborn, not just in the baptismal moment but to all eternity. It is too a rite of passage, acknowledging not just the birth but the new status of parenthood. Baptism also testifies to the uniqueness of the one baptized, which is why she or he is clearly named. And baptism proclaims a new birth, a birth 'from above' in Jesus Christ, setting the baptized within not just a human family but within the communion of saints, here and beyond here. Baptism is moreover not just about life: it is also about death, and it witnesses to our eternal safety in Christ, to our dying and our rising in Christ. Deep within our communal psyche there is still an embedded instinct that baptism is in some sense a rescue - that nothing else can declare so convincingly that this helpless babe, struggling, or even now past struggling, is safe in everlasting arms. Perhaps the need to know this is even greater for a mother who feels that she somehow failed herself to keep her baby safe enough.

Probably baptism is not normally suggested by chaplains, but it is not difficult to understand the view that what matters in such a crisis is the parents' state of mind, and that that overrides all concerns about liturgical or theological correctness. These are people who need something that is clear, unsubtle, recognisable. Perhaps baptism seems to them the obvious way to affirm that their child, hoped for, prepared for, for weeks and weeks loved and carried, has been born and was theirs however fleetingly, and will be mourned and remembered for the rest of their lives.

What parents ask for deserves to be taken seriously and to be ministered to with the best and the richest

that we can offer. But is baptism the right or the best way? Certainly baptism does witness to what is already true, and was made true for us in Christ before ever we knew or understood, or could do anything for ourselves. Yet baptism does not merely point back: it points forward to what is now only beginning and is still fully to happen, to a life still to unfold, to events, joyful and tragic, still to come, to suffering, and finally to death itself. Baptism may be an infant event, but it is really about adult living. It holds us between what is already and what is not yet. Our death, our final passage through the waters, is the completion of our baptism. In times of persecution, in a period when people were commonly not baptized until late in life, a Christian martyr who was not yet baptized was considered to be baptized by death. Tertullian wrote that "martyrdom stands in lieu of the fontal bathing when that has not been received, and restores it when lost". Something greater even than baptism had happened, something that was in itself a baptism. Nor was this a makeshift ruling to reassure the faithful: it was Jesus himself who first spoke of death as baptism, of which his baptism by John in Jordan had been the vivid and unforgettable sign (Mark 10: 38-39; Luke 12:50).

There is a clear argument then for not baptizing one who is already dead, not so much for reasons of cautious doctrine but because this is not what baptism is" about. Only by drastically modifying the rite can it be made to fit this situation in a way that gives the family; the clear message of reassurance and hope they seek.; So much would have to be left out or altered that what" is left will hardly seem like baptism at all.

If not baptism, then what? Chaplains are already being^o called to cases which they sense need ritual, something;; done, and not just pastoral conversation. Parents may be right in their instinct to ask for something which is not a funeral, something which acknowledges the birth' and not just the death. It is such cases as these that have prompted chaplains to offer a service of blessing:

In the face of stillbirth [people] need to do something to counter their feelings of powerlessness and grief. A ritual response other than baptism may be devised however, that helps parents to affirm their relationship to the dead child, to connect the child's short-live story with the divine narrative, and to enable the process of separation and grieving to begin. (Anderson and Folley p. 133)

What does such a ritual have to try to say and do?

1. It has to speak of the child, as one who though dead here in our arms was really carried, really born, and now has a name which we give her.
2. It has to speak in some fashion to the feelings of the parents, including anger and guilt, to the mother's feeling of failure to be any kind of mother at all, and to the father's feelings perhaps of helplessness and anxiety about his partner's anguish.
3. It has to avoid becoming a pre-funeral, for a funeral has a different role and other images and messages to convey.
4. It has to resist the temptation to try to say too much or become too wordy. "More is always better, and sometimes less is more". (Anderson and Folley p. 130) This is a situation full of ambiguity, and the rite can have ambiguity and unexplainedness in it too. We are in the presence of both birth and death - uniquely, unlike a funeral, we are actually holding our dead child in our arms - and so we may allow the ritual to accept and express, however simply, the uncompromising and difficult contradiction of it all. Birth and death have come together.

What might we say and do and use? Symbols and gestures may be more eloquent than our best words, though there may be useful words around too. From Scripture, such words as Isaiah 43: 1-2a may be appropriate ("Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...") - and also fitting are Jesus' words about little children, at Matthew 18: 1-5, 10-14.

The new Church of Scotland Order for Baptism contains an Address to the Child (translated from the Baptism Service of the French Reformed Church), which could be adapted for a service of blessing such as this. (Book of Common Order p. 89) It begins:

Little child [Name]...

for you, Jesus Christ came into the world;
for you he lived and showed God's love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, 'It is accomplished';

for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life...

(and here we can alter the Address as follows)

All this he did for you, little child, before you could have known of it. And such is the love of God for you, holding you from the beginning, holding you forever.

Then could follow a blessing upon the child, laying our hand upon her - either traditional or specially prepared for the occasion. And there would be prayers, simple and short, for the parents, perhaps one for the mother and one for the father, but certainly naming each; and the rest of the family too could be remembered.

As well as words and gestures, a clear and simple symbol may be valuable too. The most obvious would no doubt be a candle, lit at the beginning of the service, and afterwards given to the parents to keep and perhaps to light again in their home on the anniversary of their child's birth. An appropriate 'certificate of blessing' could be devised, and a copy given to the parents to keep, along with their other mementos of their child.

Behind these suggestions of course lies the assumption that the parents have asked for such a service. If they do not, it is for the chaplain to judge whether to offer this or not, the overriding care being for the parents themselves. Not all parents would wish to see or hold their baby, and there may be circumstances in which this is not encouraged. The pastoral care in this situation will probably never be at all routine.

Should a rite of blessing invariably be explicitly Christian? Although a chaplain may not often be involved where the family belongs to another faith or cultural tradition, 'blessing' and 'naming' have a universal meaning which transcends culture or religion. Chaplains would want freedom to use their own judgement of what is right for a particular family, and to decide whether the best response might be a simple naming ceremony that has no religious content at all. If we expect chaplains to work responsibly with people at the boundaries of faith or religious affiliation then we must respect their freedom, and trust their judgement.

Anderson and Foley in their excellent book say, "ministers need to explore ways to ritualise the story in all of its pain and complexity. Such is the beginning of true worship and authentic care". (Anderson and Foley p. 134) Pastoral care is never merely palliative, and it always calls for courage to enter the bleak isolation of those we seek to minister to. We should not be afraid that we are often ourselves anxious and lost for words in the face of pain and death. In those we minister to we may find more courage than we had expected, a tough readiness to face the pain of what has happened. Something has been given and immediately lost again; a child has been born, only to die. Yet brave young mothers and fathers can live with that contradiction, and in spite of it - perhaps in some way through it - be drawn closer together, and go on to live hopeful and creative lives. This article argues that they will not be best supported by a rite which is for the living, but by one that seeks with them to recognise realities, to express both love and grief, and to begin the painful journey forwards.

Expecting love,
we now know emptiness;
may we know more than emptiness, O God.
(Withrow p. 167)

David Hamilton is a minister in the Church of Scotland and a retired lecturer in practical theology - University of Glasgow.

References (and useful further reading)

- Anderson Herbert and Foley, Edward *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1998, p.133.
- Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland*, Saint Andrew Press, 1994, p. 89.
- Campbell Alastair V. ed., *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care* (SPCK, 1987), p 268f, "Stillbirth and Miscarriage";
- Frances Boyle, *Mothers Bereaved by Stillbirth, Neonatal Death or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome* (Ashgate, 1997);
- Hunter. R. J. ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990), pp. 744ff, "Miscarriage";
- Journal of Pastoral Care*, 32 (1978), pp. 6ff, "When birth is also a funeral"; 36 (1982), pp. 17ff, "On Stillbirth: an Open Letter to the Clergy"; 43 (1989),; pp. 68ff, "Ritual and Pastoral Care"; 47 (1993), pp.; 217ff, "Stillborn Studies: Ministry to Bereaved Parents";
- Rosemary Mander, *Loss and Bereavement in Child bearing* (Blackwood Scientific Publications, 1994).J
- Scottish Stillbirth and Infant Death Report*, 1997.
- Withrow, Lisa *Occasions of Prayer*, by (SPCK, 1999, - see especially pp. 66-67.