

## DEEP STRUGGLE – 4



Taddeo Gaddi, *Madonna del Parto*, c. 1340, San Francesco di Paola, Florence

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We like to think of pregnancy as a joyful time. We speak of a mum-to-be as blooming; the well-received news greeted with smiles – there are plans to be made, diets to be suitably adjusted (“You’re eating for two you know”) ultrasound scans and baby showers. Not for all, of course, for some it’s terrifying, in all sorts of ways.

Travel back just beyond the ‘Call the Midwife’ generations and pregnancy was dangerous – the mortality rate was shockingly high for both mother and baby. Part of the appeal of Mary the Mother of Christ to the late medieval world was that she knew and understood – there was an empathetic connection – and it is this that is explored in a particular type of image, known as *Madonna del Parto* (“*Madonna of Parturition*”) in which the Virgin Mary is shown pregnant. Such representations

developed in Italy, mainly in Tuscany in the 14th century, and owed much to Franciscan piety which drew, creatively, on the emotions.

In the small church of San Francesco di Paola in the then poor part of Florence (that bears the name Ortrarno – beyond the river Arno, even today it's the artisans district) we can find this restored and somewhat diminished painting by Taddeo Gaddi, a faithful follower of Giotto, the founding father of Renaissance art.

Taddeo presents his Madonna as a strong, clear-cut figure with almost coarse features and what might be taken as a sharp-eyed somewhat harsh expression, but this is to misunderstand the vocabulary of the artist. You see the narrow almond eyes belong to another tradition, that of the Gothic and as we look more closely, we find that her eyes are focused entirely on the beholder. She holds our gaze: we, the onlooker, have her full attention. The small tight-lipped mouth indicates concentration.

She is heavily pregnant, her garment bulging, her right hand resting against her belly, that most natural gesture familiar to all of us who have watched a loved one who carries a child. In her left hand, she holds a book which we are to understand is a closed bible – the word of God. Here is a visual meeting point, where Word and word come together.

Pregnancy plays tricks with time, in one moment it seems to compress, in the next it seems interminable, never ending. It is an emotional rollercoaster of ups and downs. An inward journey with a very visible consequence. Beyond these most natural emotions I wonder how it was for Mary, this waiting. Was her pregnancy fear-filled, unmarried as she was, unsure of her future? Were their whispered words at the well, pointed words their pierced and stung? Was her visit to Elizabeth a necessary precaution, and her journey to Bethlehem, utterly reckless as it seems, the 'last resort, the safest option'?

However we see it, the saying yes to God left her vulnerable, her time of waiting took courage and that's what we might take from this much damaged and faded fresco – as we wait in prayer. New life, biological or otherwise involves blood, sweat and tears; beyond pain and hardship we trust there will, in the end, be joy.

Earlier in May VE Day was remembered. In one of his wartime speeches Winston Churchill spoke of blood, sweat and tears. Was he aware that he was using the language of the birth-stool? Certainly Jesus used it (John 16:21-23) as did Paul (Romans 8:18-25). There is a time of waiting in disorder and pain – but the future joy waits to be delivered in due time. Prayer can be a sweaty business – God knows.