

# King's College London Chapel



A sermon on the theme of God as Midwife,  
by Annelie Hoffmeister,  
in the College Chapel on the Strand,  
on Wednesday 14 December 2022.

May I speak in the name of God, who is Creator, Redeemer and Deliverer. **Amen.**

You might have noticed that our human verbal language depends very much on figurative language, such as metaphors but also comparisons, hyperboles or analogies. As we know about metaphors from our past English classes in school or university, or in my case my German classes, they are an important rhetorical device in literature. We know many famous metaphors: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” (Shakespeare) Or “My mom always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” (from the film *Forrest Gump*). But we often don’t realise how frequently we use metaphors ourselves and how much we rely on them in our daily communication. We say things like “being over the moon” or “being in the same boat as someone else”. Metaphors are such an important tool because they help us to understand and to convey complex matters, emotions and ideas by creating an image for us. It is, in fact, more a way of thought than just words and this formulation from a BBC article I like very much: “it is an invitation to understand something”. The philosopher Aristotle defines in his work *About Poetics* that “a metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else”.

As for God, quasi the epitome of a complex matter, we are familiar with many metaphors. In our series of sermons this term we heard about God as a Father, Mother, Friend, Refuge, Rock and Artist and there are many more names and images for God in the Bible. Analogous to Aristotle’s definition, we give God a name and meaning of something else to try to understand what God is, otherwise God could be just an abstract idea. These metaphors about God are helpful images for us to determine where God is and how can we talk about God, which qualities and attributes ‘fit’ God. So we have to find metaphors for God to help us to understand what God actually means or ‘is’; although some theologians and philosophers discuss to what extent we actually can use the verb ‘to be’ for God, as we understand that God is not an entity as we humans are.

A less known metaphor for God is the image of God as a Midwife. We know how metaphors work, one rarely can take them literally: God is not working as a midwife in a hospital context delivering babies or acts like a judge, all bewigged and robed in a court. The Midwife image reveals an important aspect of God, especially also when we look at the gender aspect, since the profession of

midwifery in ancient times in a strongly patriarchal system was occupied exclusively by women. The profession of midwifery, meaning 'with women', is as old as humankind. In the ancient world of the Levant and the Mediterranean it was a common specialised profession for women with the aim to optimise human reproduction, to monitor pregnancies and the birth process. In Biblical Hebrew the word: מְיַלְּדֵת *měyalledet* (*piel of yld*) is used for a midwife, meaning literally: one who helps birth. The pregnancy and birth process can have complications and was and is until today not without risk to mother or child, hence the need for an experienced practitioner and for the development of the profession. For the Hebrews and later Israelites and until modern Judaism today creating offspring is a major commandment: "God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply", Genesis 1,28. How important birth in the Hebrew Bible is can be seen from the *toledot* lists - the list of 'begottens', the formerly barren (arch-) mothers and God's promise and interventions to create new generations. This continues in the New Testament with a very famous birth. In Advent we are waiting for the coming of God's own son, who is born from a human woman. Interestingly without the assistance of a midwife, at least Scripture does not mention a midwife, but we don't know what Joseph was doing. With Christmas we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Christ, who is deeply connected with the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible.

In the Hebrew Bible we find several mentions of midwives. The most famous ones certainly are the two Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who appear in Exodus 1. If I recall correctly, they are the only midwives who are mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible. These midwives are famous because they don't obey the Pharaoh's order to kill all the newborn male babies of the Hebrews, but instead they choose to let them live and tell the Pharaoh a lie. The result is that the people of the Hebrews become numerous and the midwives are rewarded from God with families of their own. It is mentioned twice that the infant saving midwives fear God, they don't obey the cruel order of the Pharaoh to kill all the male infants. But instead the midwives do God's will to preserve life, especially the life of the most vulnerable, i.e. the newborn babies. Above all preserving and sustaining life is key. And this is exactly what midwives do: ensuring that the life of mother and child are preserved if possible, that a family survives the challenging process of birth. That the mother delivers the child and is delivered from pain and that the child is delivered from the mother's womb. Ensuring deliverance here is vital for mother and child.

In our reading in psalm 71 we have a deliverance not just from physical danger but also from a state of mental despair. The psalmist, in British understatement, is going through "a bit of a rough patch". The psalmist turns towards God and remembers God. A lot of images for God are recycled here, we find them in other psalms, for instance rock and refuge. They are common images. Lots of them have a military character, in verse 3 it says: give the command to save me, you are my rock and fortress. But in verses 5 and 6 the tone changes, it is softer and more personal: God is remembered as the one who has been there from their birth and is the one who brought them forth from their mother's womb. God is identified as a midwife here by acting like a midwife, being present at birth, assisting the birth and delivering the child *safely*. The deliverance and separation from mother and child are vital. Often the child and/or the mother did not survive the birth process. One famous example in the bible is Rachel who does not survive the birth of her second child, even though the midwife mentioned probably tried her very best to save her. The psalmist puts their hope and trust in God to be delivered again from pain and danger. But not just to be saved again by God, but they also put their trust in God to be present as God was with them when they were born and in the time of their youth. The Latin word for midwife is *obstetrix*, which derives from the verb: *obstare*, meaning "to stand before or behind (someone)". It is helpful to imagine God's presence, acting like a midwife, standing behind or with a person in pain. The psalmist addresses God's reliability, also because the psalmist identifies God to be the one who is accountable for the good things but now the psalmist is in despair and suffers and is waiting for God's act of deliverance once again.

We have another psalm, psalm 22, where God is acting like a midwife, the same image and language is used: “you brought me out of the womb”, but further here: “you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast”. Both psalm 22 and 71 have the same theme, the pledge for God to deliver them from a place of danger, from suffering, be it physical danger or mental despair, so that they can continue to live, to live refreshed and with new hope. They both remember God as a midwife who took them from the mother’s womb, which is the start of the individual life. This image brings peace, hope and trust in God to the psalmist, in an invisible God but in one who is recognised through good things and deeds. Here in the psalms God is already understood as a God who cares about the vulnerable. God is identified as the one who works through the midwives Shiphrah and Puah and preserves life and does not just take the side of the mighty and powerful. This image of God and this understanding brings comfort to the psalmist and also to us. We also can discern that God is understood as not having one gender, God seems to be beyond gender, non-binary, neither male nor female. Nevertheless, traditional gender images are used to determine what God is for us and it is wonderful to see that midwives and their qualities are noticed and honoured by using a midwife image for God. As we know back in those days, exclusively women were midwives and they had far less freedom and influence in society than men and therefore women belonged to the vulnerable and marginalised themselves.

This caring for the vulnerable connects the image of the midwife with Jesus Christ. We remember Mary’s song, the Magnificat, after the annunciation, God is praised for its deeds which God gave to its faithful people. Jesus is the one who will fulfil and continue God’s promise to turn the present order upside down and, *spoiler alert*, Jesus will even do more: he promises that we will be new again, reborn after being delivered from the past, from the old Adam, like the psalmist trusts in God to be reborn again with a new spirit leaving behind their despair, with a spirit of hope. In our gospel reading today Jesus explains what it means to be born again, meaning born from above. We know that we can’t go through the physical process twice, but we know that rebirth is brought about in baptism by the Holy Spirit, by choosing to follow and put our hope and trust in God for the renewal of humankind.

God as a Midwife gives us indeed an image which helps us to see certain qualities of God: God as a Midwife is present, as God is with us in Jesus, meaning *Emmanuel*. God is there before we are born when we are floating around in our mother’s womb, when we are born and have our first contact with our parents and afterwards. God as the Midwife cares for us and supports us, God as a Midwife guides us as the midwife guides the mother and the baby and delivers us from difficulties. We have to put our trust in the midwife, for the midwife has the expertise and knowledge in terms of the birth process, as God knows about life and everything about us.

*Amen.*