

Living with Thorns

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Gospel: Mark 6:1-13

Proper 9

I imagine all of us have had to deal with thorns in the flesh, whether from roses, brambles or something more sinister. They may be small things, but they can cause a lot of pain, particularly if allowed to sink in, making them difficult to extract. Some will not be extracted and just have to be endured.

There are of course, many different kinds of thorns. As in Paul's case, it may be a physical problem such as epilepsy, migraine or some other disability. Those of us who are lucky enough to have been spared unfortunate genes, or tragic accidents can only admire those who are physically impaired but who manage to remain spiritually strong. If you are one such person, I would like to thank you for what you have shown to the rest of us.

Thorns can also be psychological. Jeremiah and Elijah suffered from depression. David was scarred by guilt at his own adultery and grief at death of his beloved son Absalom. Think of the thorns that are borne right here in this church. They may be thorns of grief, for an untimely death of a spouse, a child or a much loved friend. They may be thorns of regret, of an opportunity missed, a path not taken.

A thorn can be a difficult divorce, a wayward child, a lapse of judgement or a mistake. Or it may just be the enduring pressure of everyday life. Whatever they are, thorns are things we are stuck with, sometimes for a long time; and all of them are associated with the pain of loss – loss of health, of hope, of control.

So now I invite you to think of a thorn in your flesh, a real “messenger of Satan” in your life. Just choose one – you don't have to tell anyone - and then we'll consider how St. Paul addressed his and how we might deal with ours.

Of course it's possible that some of you haven't been able to find a thorn. In that case, you are either extremely lucky, or your wounds are buried too deeply. But I'm sure we can all identify some of the enormous thorns in the flesh of our world: wars, poverty, climate change.

Paul was very conscious of his thorn, whatever it may have been. “Three times I prayed to the Lord about this, that it might leave me ...” he says.

Prayer is one of our greatest privileges, and it was an important part of Paul's life. "Do not be anxious about anything", He urged his followers, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). Whether we realise it or not, we all spend a great deal of time praying: there is the awed silence we fall into when we experience something very beautiful or very good; the pain we feel at someone else's pain; the joy at someone else's joy. These are all prayers in their own way – spoken to something beyond ourselves.

The prayers that Paul refers to in this passage are prayers of petition, focussed and direct. Three times he got down on his knees and begged to be relieved from whatever it was. One wonders what happened each of these three times. I would guess that the first time, Paul did not receive much of an answer at all, but rose from his prayer in better spirits. In other words, the first time Paul simply unburdened himself, pouring out all his pain, his grief and his frustration. This is something all of us need to do on occasion, to cry out at the unfairness of this crazy world. And that may be enough, at least for a while.

And what about the second time? Perhaps the second time the answer was something like, "Yes Paul, but remember that it takes both sunshine and rain to make one of my rainbows. You are a keen observer of the human condition. And you know that those who know only prosperity and pleasure become hard and shallow. Those whose lives have known adversity can be kind and gracious. Life is a slow process of learning to be kind".

In other words, pain can contribute more to life than pleasure; and what makes us unhappy can also make us more alive. If we can allow God to help us accept our thorns, we can then begin to grow in patience and kindness, and so become closer to the people God created us to be.

Then, sometime later, comes the third time. I would guess that the third time Paul discovered that there can be strength in failure. It is not that his prayer is unanswered, but the deliverance that he longs for will not be granted. His thorn will not be extracted. Instead, Christ will be with him in his pain and will turn his agony into an inner strength. "My grace is sufficient for you", said the Lord, "for power is made perfect in weakness".

This is a reminder that no prayer goes unheard by God. God wants our prayers, but his refusal to grant all our requests is his way of protecting us from any illusions we may have about our own strength or self-reliance. The truth is that every one of us has had to cope with pain. We have all have times of feeling

depressed, insecure or overwhelmed. Paul was no exception, but whatever limitation he faced, his weakness helped him to rely not on himself but on God. Instead of taking away Paul's pain, God gave him the strength to bear it. This is the paradox of faith. That weakness becomes a pathway to God's grace, for power is made perfect in weakness.

This does not mean that we must grin and bear every hurt, hardship or calamity that comes our way. There are certainly "thorns" - our own and those of others, that can be eliminated and should be. Not to do so would be to ignore justice, compassion and good sense. But when suffering is inevitable as it can be, we should not be ashamed of our weakness, but rather turn to God's strength, grace and power of which there is no limit. After all, it was God's power 2000 years ago that took the terrible wreckage of the cross and turned it into something holy and beautiful, that took human vulnerability and made it whole, an offering of grace for all of creation.

Amen

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7th July 2024