

SERMON AT THE GOOD FRIDAY ECUMENICAL SERVICE: DALYELLUP: 30/3/2018:
GEOFF CHADWICK
"THORNS"

19Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. 3They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. 4Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' 5So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!'
(Jn 19:1-5, NRSV)

Our theme for today is thorns.

So let's begin with a dictionary definition:

thorn - a stiff, sharp-pointed woody projection on the stem or other part of a plant., a thorny bush, shrub, or tree, especially a hawthorn.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/thorn> accessed 30/3/2018

Thorns of course, have a purpose. They are designed to protect a plant from pests. A well-placed thorn thicket also makes a perfect barrier to potential intruders. Those of you who have travelled in England would be very familiar with the protective hedges that line the countryside. Thorn bushes such as these protect by inflicting pain on the intruder. A little bit of pain keeps the trespasser away.

And so, we have *thorns* mentioned in the crucifixion story. A *crown of thorns* to be more specific. What are we to make of this? What message does this thorny crown give us today?

Firstly, there's the message of **protection**. If the purpose of thorns is to protect by inflicting pain then in Jesus' crown we see the status quo endeavouring to protect its own interests.

The privileged and the powerful of Jesus' day pierce him with thorns in an attempt to keep their status and influence safe. The religious authorities acted out of fear, and the Romans acted out of power. There was an uneasy truce between the Jews and Rome at this time

and any disturbance could easily lead to trouble. Rome demanded Caesar worship but the Jews saw this as idolatry so national disaster was always a real possibility. We must not be too hard on Caiaphas and his band of faithful Jews. Their desire was to preserve faith in God according to orthodoxy. They saw themselves on the side of God, it's just that Jesus' expression of that faith did not match their conservative views. To them Jesus was a maverick, and mavericks are trouble at the best of times. Meanwhile Pilate had problems of his own. Caesar demanded obedience to Rome and Pilate was ordered to enforce it. Pilate, however, found the Jewish nation far from compliant and was known to demand compliance via cruelty.

So both Caiaphas and Pilate had trouble at hand and to defend themselves against that threat they chose the way of pain. They chose to pierce the threat, to lash out at it and to force the issue with a heavy hand. This is the way of thorns. To pierce the threat in your way. To defend oneself by attacking the enemy.

The message of the thorns is also the message of **pain**. Jesus' spiked forehead reminds us that pain is real. No one is able to escape pain. Curiously pain may be the only thing that binds us together as human beings. All of us know pain. All of us receive pain and all of us inflict it. There's the physical pain of a broken body. There's the emotional pain of a mind in turmoil. And there's the inner turmoil of spiritual pain. Not only that, we are all capable of twisting our relationships into crown thorns, we are capable of piercing the souls of our brothers and sisters, and we can even inflict with a thorn without realising it...

Yet pain is an odd thing. As human beings it is pain that brings about our most heroic moments, and it is pain that forms the most compassionate of hearts.

And thirdly, the message of the thorns is the message of **kingship**. The scripture states that the soldiers twisted thorns into a crown, put a fake royal robe on Jesus and mocked him as a would-be king. Even the title above the cross in three languages made the point: *“Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews”*. Pilate and the soldiers are mocking Jesus all the way.

They’re saying: *“Do you really think this tortured mangled man dying a criminal’s death is really a king? Why not compare this spectacle to the splendour of Caesar- now there’s a real king!”*

But the whole scene is irony twisted in upon itself. The one who looks anything like a king is the true king, and the one who has the royalty of Rome is no king at all. The thorny crown of agony is the true crown of the true *king of kings*. The mocking tile “King of the Jews” speaks the truth, and the mocking veneration of the solders *“Hail – king of the Jews”* is in fact God directed. In God’s economy kingship and thorns go together. The true king knows the piercing thorns of self-protection for what they are. The true king knows pain, and the true king exposes the truth hidden behind every form of mocking. This is our king. Jesus of Nazareth. The one who wears the thorns.

So how are your thorns at the moment? Are you hurting? Are you hurting someone else? Are you mocking what shouldn’t be mocked? Are you caught up in a twisted tangle of thorn bushes?

If so, you have an opportunity this morning to lay these “thorns” before the cross. It’s an opportunity to acknowledge them for what they are and to hand them over to God for him to sort out. Now some thorns are more painful than others, and some are embedded in us more deeply than others. But laying down before God is always a good start.

A poem by Linda Winchell

*I have never stopped to thank you, "Lord"
For the thorns in my life you gave.
I've only looked at the blooms on top
Of the roses that you've made.*

*But the thorns are there to always remind me
Of the suffering you had endured.
And for all the tears you've shed for me
And your cries that went silently unheard.*

*Thank you Lord for the thorns
For they're pokes, have made me stronger yet.
To handle all I have to, "My Lord"
And more I will inevitably come yet to get.*

Linda Winchell

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/thank-you-for-the-thorns/> Accessed 29/3/2018

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.