

A THORNY PROBLEM

Pentecost 7 Year B

2 Sam 5:1-5, 9-10; Ps 48 2 Cor 12:2-10; Mk 6:1-13

Gladstone 08/07/2018

You may have heard the story about the novice mountain climber who had lost his grip on the climbing rope and was holding on to a thin safety rope. He looked down at the ground several hundred feet below and saw no one who could help him. So, he cried out toward the top, "Can anybody up there please help me?" After several cries he heard a voice respond, "What do you need, my son?" The young climber cried out, "Please, please pull me up, I am barely holding on!" A deep voice responded again, "I am the Lord God, you can let go of your rope, and I will save you." The desperate mountain climber paused for a moment and then yelled back, "Is there anybody else up there?"

As Christians, we often claim that we put our trust in God and are able to let go of our weak safety lines, but really most of us are pretty much novices when it all boils down to it. Last week, you will remember how we spoke of the young David's trust in God as he faced Goliath on the battlefield with just a home made sling and five smooth stones—only one of which he needed, as it turned out. And it's that sort of trust that David exercised throughout his life, with God claiming that David was "a man after God's own heart." It would certainly be nice to think that we were all "people after God's own heart." Well, I don't know about you but I ain't there yet—not by a long shot.

Throughout our lives there are going to be many things that interrupt our joy of life—things that will cause pain, loss and grief—thorns that can bury themselves deep into our soul.

The great Christian writer, C. S. Lewis says in one of his most popular books, *The Problem of Pain*, that the problem of pain is that God knows about it and still allows it to happen. Sorrow, sickness, disappointment, all hurt deep within. Sometimes it seems that God does nothing to help, and at times he is telling us to let go of the thin threads to which we have been desperately clinging. Lewis goes on to teach us that the reason that God allows his beloved children to suffer pain is that it's through our problems that we're formed into adult children who are capable of Christian maturity and strength of character.

The Jewish Rabbi, Harold Kushner addresses the same issue in his book, *When bad things happen to good people*, although he addresses it from a slightly different

perspective. Other authors who write on this subject look at the pain and suffering that people experience throughout their lives, as character building.

Sometimes, however, when we ask the question of why people, Christians included, are called to suffer, we are forced to echo Paul's refrain, "I do not know; God knows." And the real question is not, "Why do people suffer?" but "Why am I suffering?" "Why is it happening to me?"

(For those who would like to know more on the subject, they can refer to my 15,000-word honours thesis on *Evil and Suffering*.) [shameless plug]

When Paul, speaks on the subject, he is, of course, speaking from experience. Many times during his missionary adventures, he was subject to all kinds of pain and suffering—many near death escapes, sickness, imprisonments, shipwrecks and even a stoning by his enemies who left him for dead. Through all of this however, Paul had found his source of strength in Christ, whom he served.

In the passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, that we are looking at this morning, Paul tells the story of someone who was caught up into the third heaven and experienced some wonderful things. While Paul speaks of this person in the 3rd person, generally, scholars assume that this out of body experience, that he relates here, of being caught up into Paradise, was autobiographical and that it was through such experiences, that he had learned to lean on and trust in God. One thing he hadn't prayed for and had not expected from this divine vision was being given, what he describes, as a thorn in the flesh. Rather than try to find some meaning in this experience. He just said, "I do not know; God knows."

Throughout his life, Paul had learned the lesson that it's through our weakness that we are made strong. It's in the trials and testing that we can be made useful for future battles. But what about this "thorn in the flesh." It seems like God is allowing this *particular* infliction on Paul to somehow balance out the ecstasy Paul experienced in his moments in Paradise—to keep his feet firmly on the ground, as it were—to keep him humble—to keep him from becoming too elated, too puffed up with pride. It's to remind him that he is dependent on God. When Paul asked about it, God spoke to him saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Some suggest Paul's thorn was his poor eyesight that plagued him throughout his ministry. Some suggest it may have been the Judaisers that continually followed him around, trying to undermine his ministry. Some have even suggested it was his wife (I'm not too sure where they got that one from.)

There are times when we all feel like throwing in the towel when the thorns start piercing. Although pain is never a welcome guest—as coaches sometimes remind athletes in training, “There is no gain without the pain!” It's often suggested that the pain we have in life is allowed because through it, we grow in our faith and trust in God.

Can we really expect to be turned into mature Christians without some painful experiences? Well, the answer is probably “no”, but it's a little more complicated than that. We understand that when we are sick or in need of help, people will pray for us and we can certainly pray for ourselves. That's a part of what we do for one another. For our part, however, we also need to experience the stillness that comes when we “let go of the rope,” and simply trust that God will be there to save us.

Although a theologian in his own right, Paul doesn't have all the answers. In this letter, we hear him saying that there are many times he can only answer, “I do not know; God knows.” While we understand that God is all-knowing, everywhere-present and all-powerful, our experience of pain might suggest otherwise. We certainly believe that God can step in and change things as we pray. Our experience, however, is that God does not always do that. Sometimes we are left with, “I do not know; God knows.”

Most of us pray about all sorts of things. We pray for one another each week in church. We pray with those who are lonely or sick or in pain. Sometimes we pray for rain, and then pray that it will stop. We pray for healing and wholeness for ourselves and others—our family, our neighbours and our friends. Sometimes amazing things will happen as we witness the healing and helping hand of God ministering to us and those for whom we pray. God is able to do anything that is in accordance with His plan.

One of the wonderful and mysterious things about being a Christian, however, is that when we learn to lean on God we do not have to know all the answers. Research scientists often make thousands of wrong choices as they try to discover just the right

formula. The only formula given to us is: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

This is why Paul says that if he is going to boast in anything, he will boast about his weakness—not his experience of Paradise—not of being lifted up to the third heaven—not of all the wonderful things he saw and heard there—but of his weakness—that which keeps him grounded and totally reliant on God. It’s the same for us. The thorns that we experience through life, remind us that we are totally reliant on God.

The theologian, Austin Farrer in his book, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, sums up the reliance on God of those who suffer, when he states,

We turn to God not as an explanatory cause, but as a saving power; not as the ground of all existence, but as a rock on which to plant our feet; or rather, as himself our rescuer from that whirlpool, in which all things, whether good or evil, senseless or sentient, are sucked down. (15)

What this means is that in the context of suffering, our focus ought not to be on the “Why” of our thorny experience, but on the power of God in salvation and his redemption of us from those things that bring us down and cause us to question his love and goodness. By ourselves we are unable to deal with all the thorns that confront us. The things that happen to us, the tragedies and difficult times, can cause us to question our faith. But it is also in those experiences that we are led in some tangible way to cling to God?

Furthermore, Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and the author of the book, *The Wounded Healer*, explains that it is only in our brokenness that we are able to minister to others. It provides us with an understanding of the brokenness of others. In our brokenness we are able reach out in compassion to others.

When we experience the thorns of life, how do we respond? We can curse them and maybe try to cast them aside—be the stoic, or we can let go of the rope and rest in the stillness of God’s grace—a grace that is sufficient for each one of us.

To the God of grace, be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.