

Sermon Archive 349

Sunday 4 July, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



There's a thorn there, in that flesh. Thorns are sharp. They hurt. They create scars and damage. They make it hard to get on normally. They detract from our joy. Sometimes they make us wince or limp. It would be better, we often think, if we didn't have thorns. But when Paul talks about the thorn in his flesh, what exactly does he mean? And what does his God say in response?

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Well, there is no shortage of theories about what Paul means. One school of thought focuses in on the drama around Paul's conversion experience. Do you remember it? One minute he's riding along the road to Damascus; the next he's off his horse, on the ground, hearing voices and unable to see. Does Paul have *epilepsy*? Or some kind of severe migraine condition - needing him to spend days at a time in the darkness of Ananias's house, being nursed out of his helplessness? Or, given that he's hearing voices, does he suffer some kind of psychosis? This theory centres on *physical*, medical conditions. And it resonates with anyone who's found physical things interfering with the life they feel they'd want to live. Into this pot you could throw things like *physical* addictions, any *flesh-enshrined* hurdle to peaceful enjoyment of life. We flesh and blood creatures are not without experience of this kind of thorn. God, take away the physical!

A second theory focuses on the claim that the thorn's function is to stop Paul from *boasting*. Is Paul inclined to be boastful? To be a little bit full of himself? Is *arrogance* something that might bring him distress? Not when he's mid-stream in being arrogant, busy and distracted by his fullness of self, but later - when in the quiet he's replaying those scenes in his mind - seeing more clearly the offence he's caused to others? (O my God, did I really do that? Treat that other person so condescendingly? Did I hurt feelings, curse others on my way up the ladder?) Might Paul have had quiet moments, some time later, of self-awareness that left him wishing he'd been kinder, more humane, more moderated by humility, just nicer to be around? Whether the arrogance is seated in a deeper insecurity, a sub-cultural sense of superiority, or a Darwinian drive to be fittest, we sometimes-aware ladder-

climbers are not without experience of this kind of thorn. Will God take it away?

A third theory revolves around the recurring presence in Paul's life of conflict. It seems that wherever he goes, arguments seem to break out. It's like they follow him. For a while he travels well with Mark, but then they part on separate journeys. He works a while with Silas, who soon finds an excuse to go somewhere else. He seems to need to give huge parts of his energy to dealing with disagreements in the communities he's formed. (Let's argue about money. Let's argue about food offered to idols. Let's argue about circumcision. Let's argue about speaking in tongues. Let's argue about belonging to Apollos. Let's argue about false Messiahs. Let's argue about the most efficient way to make a wreck of Christian faith.)

And as all our energy is soaked up in this chronic arguing, let's try not to cry too much about there being no energy left for anything else - anything like faith, hope or love. I wonder if Paul ever found himself, as he fell into yet another conflict, thinking to himself "could there be a common denominator here? Is it me? Is there something about me, how I work, who I am, that creates conflict? Do I need to do something differently, process opinion more gently, get people on board more collaboratively? Because, surely, life shouldn't be this full of conflict. As fires and hot-spots break out around the world, we people of conviction are not without wanting to call all this a "sharpness of the thorn".

A fourth theory hones in on the fact that, in a former life, Paul had done some terrible things. He witnessed the stoning to death of a young man called Stephen. He's said to have held the cloaks of those doing the stoning. He's said to have approved of the murder. I wonder whether this kind of sight (a lovely, hopeful young man being killed) is the kind of sight that might haunt you - create in you a **thorn** in your soul. The technical description of Paul's behaviour is "persecution of the church", or "zeal"; but the reality is blood and weeping over someone you've killed. Does Derek Chauvin recurringly see George Floyd? Do Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson see Matthew Shepard tied to the fence? Does Harry Truman see the citizens of Hiroshima? Should nightmares debilitate them, is post-traumatic stress a thorn to them? Is the inability to cope with what we've done constitute a thorn about which we speak to our God? This theory has some force.

A fifth theory is floated by John Spong - who does a close reading of some of Paul's writings on flesh and spirit - Paul's own experience of mind and body. Spong writes:

Paul felt tremendous guilt and shame, which produced in him self-loathing. The presence of homosexuality would have created this response among Jewish people in that period of history. Nothing else, in my opinion, could account for Paul's self-judging rhetoric, his negative feeling towards his own body, and his sense of being controlled by something he had no power to change. The war that went on between what he desired with his mind and what he desired with his body, his drivenness to a legalistic religion of control, his fear when that system was threatened, his attitude toward women, his refusal to seek marriage as an outlet for his passion - nothing else accounts for this data as well as the possibility that Paul was a gay male". [Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism, page 117]

Whether you're convinced by Spong or not that Paul was gay, and regardless of how we these days might just want to give him a hug and say "it's OK Paul", it's certainly clear that he's processing some complicated sexual feelings and a whole lot of guilt. Is this the kind of thing that a man of his culture and time might describe as a thorn in the flesh? It is, of course, just a theory. As I said, there are many theories.

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For our purposes, picking a favourite theory isn't really important. More important is what we see Paul wanting to have done with his thorn. His first instinct is to pray (three times over - three times that he's prepared to admit) that the thorn might disappear, be taken away. And I think any of us, regardless of which ever theory persuades us most, can see why a human being would want a thorn to be removed. How did the sermon begin?" The preacher said "*thorns are sharp. They hurt. They create scars and damage. They make it hard to get on normally. Sometimes they make us wince or limp. It would be better, we often think, if we didn't have the thorns.*" So yes, it makes human sense when Paul asks, three times over, for the thorn to be removed. The next big issue is what Paul's God now does. Will his God remove the thorn? Will God take the thorn away?

It seems that Paul's God is not the kind of God simply to take away the things that trouble us. If the thorn is a medical condition, Paul's God brings no miracle cure. If the thorn is arrogance, no wave of humility washes the world. If the thorn is conflict, no lamb takes a sleeping position next to a lion - not yet (only as a vision). If the thorn is post-traumatic experience, history is not erased or changed, such that we don't need to face it. If the thorn is our inability to love who we are sexually, then this God comes with no conversion therapy to cancel us out. **This**

God does no remote miracle beyond the scene, but engages with Paul (on-goingly), helping him to live more fully with the thing he describes as "a thorn". In the absence of any quick-fix removal, and in the presence of an on-going "my grace is sufficient for this day" (I'm with you today), Paul has to live with his thorn, but somehow is able to articulate the paradox: "whenever I am weak (through the thorn), then I am strong". In this dialogue with the God who doesn't remove the thorn, Paul is finding a strange new strength through someone who is with him day by day.

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I wonder if this is working for you - a god who walks us through the thorns until we become stronger. I wonder this, because I remember preaching another sermon on this text once in Sydney. In response one person said to me "good effort, Pollyanna; but it's not true that when I'm weak, I'm actually strong. Really, when I'm weak, I'm simply weak."

As I heard this man's claim, I wondered what Paul might have said. I wondered if Paul might have been able to speak of the people who had stood with him as he battled his pain, and who made him feel less alone. I wondered if he might have been able to speak about grace coming to him through friends, people who couldn't fix the presenting problem but who nevertheless. I wondered if Paul might have been able to speak about the healing power of compassion, the strength that comes from being understood - and how he thought "God" might have been caught up in all of that.

I don't know what Paul's thorn was; but I hear him speaking of a healing and a growing that comes even when the thorn is not taken away. And I feel sure that it's that kind of healing and growth we are called to seek as people of faith - who are called to love God and neighbour.

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There's a thorn there, in that flesh. Thorns are sharp. They hurt. They create scars and damage. They detract from our joy. It would be better if we didn't have thorns. But instead we're called to strengthen one another.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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