

"And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me...to keep me from being too elated.

And three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness'".

(II Corinthians 12: 7 - 9)

INTRODUCTION

They're small things, thorns, like blips on a large screen. But as we all know, a small blip can sink you. In this world, nothing is easier than to have the experience and miss the meaning. And nothing, perhaps, is more difficult than to have the experience of a thorn in the flesh - and then to extract - not the thorn - but every ounce of meaning that is available in the experience.

As in St. Paul's case, a thorn in the flesh may be a physical disability. Those of us lucky enough to have been spared ornery genes, or tragic automobile and other kinds of accidents, can never, I think, show sufficient admiration for those whose physical lives have been maimed, yet who survive spiritually intact. If this sermon is dedicated to anyone, it's dedicated to you for what you've shown the rest of us. God bless you!

But Paul's "thorn in the flesh" may also be psychosomatic. Moses, it would seem, had a stammer. And a thorn can be totally psychological. I think in Jeremiah we sense a man who is constantly overcome by a sense of insufficiency. Think of the thorns being borne right here, today, in this Church. Some ~~are~~ are thorns of grief - for a child, a husband, or a wife whose death was totally unwarranted. Others carry thorns of betrayal. One of Arthur Miller's characters says, "God, why is betrayal the only truth that sticks?"

A thorn can also be a divorce, long past, which still poisons the bloodstream of our lives. A thorn can be a child we think has disgraced us, or one we think we have disgraced. A thorn can be any lapse of judgement, or mistake. The way we treasure mistakes makes me think sometimes that they are the holiest things in our past. We need to let go of them. "Forgetting what lies behind" said Paul...

DEVELOPMENT

You see what I'm getting at: in this world there are things hoped for, and things stuck with. The thorns are what we're stuck with.

Some might say that President Carter has something of a "thorn in the flesh". What was it that Mayor Koch said last Spring in referring to the President's "thorn". "We can chose our friends, but we're stuck with our relatives". There is that sense in which we're stuck with the thorns of life. All of them cause pain, that real pain which is associated with loss: loss of health, loss of faith and hope, as when we somehow feel unblessed; loss of joy, loss of love, loss of power, too.

To see how hurt we feel through loss of power we have only to recall the thorn in the flesh of the nation today - those 52 hostages we cannot seem to extract from Iran. So humiliated are we as a people through loss of power that today, in foreign affairs, almost any issue is turned into a test of strength.

PICK OUT A THORN

So, take a moment here this morning to pick out a thorn in the flesh - a real "messenger of Satan" - there, in your own life. Pick one out and then we'll see if you and I deal with our thorns the way that St. Paul deal with his.

I'd really love to ask for a show of hands to see how many of you found no thorn at all! You're free to leave if you found no thorn; maybe you're luckier than most. More likely, it's because as Pascal said, "Our wounds are too deep; we cannot examine them". And if so, that's sad, because what's beyond recall is generally beyond redemption.

TO THE LORD IN PRAYER

St. Paul, of course, is keenly conscious of his thorn. Although we don't know whether it was epilepsy or something else, we do know that Paul "took it to the Lord in prayer". "Three times" he says, "I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me."

Generally, prayer is not an act of self-expression. Prayer is an act of empathy. Prayer is thinking God's thoughts after Him. Prayer is praying "Our father, who art in heaven" when everything within us longs to cry out "my father" because "our" includes that horrible divorced mate who has betrayed our trust, that wayward child who frustrates us. It includes the muggers, the rappers, the snobs, the Iranian captors, all the many people who daily jam thorns into our flesh. How they tear and rip and hurt and make us bleed.

But sometimes, prayer is an act of self-expression. It was to St. Paul. "Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me." When we express our feelings to God, we should, like Paul, be as specific as possible. Don't be content to pray, "Lord, I'm in great pain". Say, "Lord, feel the throbbing in my knee", or "Lord, you know my heart is heavy with grief because of Johnny's death". There's too much dignity in our prayers - dignity at the expense of being specific. It is really fake dignity, the kind that puts taste ahead of truth and honesty. So never mind how crude or trivial or chapped they may be. Remember this: there are no unimportant tears to God, the Father.

FIRST TIME AROUND

"Three times I besought the Lord." What do you suppose happened the first time, what happened the second time, and what happened on the third go-around? Let's analyze it.

It seems to me that the first time around Paul probably did not receive the answer he records in 2nd Corinthians. It would make more sense if, by way of an answer he heard nothing, but rose from prayer a better person. And that is no mean answer. In fact, that's answer sufficient in many cases.

In other words, the first time Paul simply unburdened himself - all of his pent-up anger, frustration and grief. In this crazy mixed-up world you have to "dump the mud". Don't be so proud to think that you don't have to. All of us do!

Christ-like

I know of a monk, probably the most saintly person I know. Someone told me on Monday that in a recent meeting, a stupid man was saying some stupid things and suddenly this monk got up, walked around the room and punched the man right in the nose. You see, even a saint has to "dump the mud", although probably on the nose of another person may not be as good a place as in the lap of the Almighty. "Three times I besought the Lord". The first time Paul, I imagine, simply wanted to unburden himself. And that's enough for at least a week or two!

WHAT ABOUT THE SECOND TIME

Now what about the second time? It would be true to the essence of life if the second time around Paul received an answer that went something like this:

"I hear what you're saying, Paul, but let me remind you that it takes both sunshine and rain to make one of my rainbows. You're a keen observer of the human condition. You know that people tend to live merely in the service of their own success. Those who know nothing but prosperity and pleasure become hard and shallow. Those whose prosperity has been mixed with adversity can be kind and gracious. And civilization, Paul, from a heavenly point of view, is only a slow process of learning to be kind."

I'm sure you would agree with me that tension is the pulse of life. As Blake said, "without contraries there is no progression". Moreover, I think you will agree with me that what makes us unhappy can also make us more alive. Often pain can bring more life than pleasure. But for this kind of life to sprout and to flourish we have to stop denying and defying these thorns. We have to begin to accept them. More than that: we have to befriend the enemy. The torah says the true hero is one who makes a friend of his enemy.

Let's apply that to our internal enemies. Each of us has a whole community of folk dwelling inside us; some are friendly, and other real enemies. When for the second time we take our thorn to the Lord, we have to begin to allow the Lord to help us embrace the thorn. And finally, you must take your whole life in your arms, and allow your self and your life to be embraced by the almighty arms of God Himself. That seems to me would be a good agenda for the second time.

AND THEN THE THIRD TIME

Then - sometime later - comes the third time. My guess is that, the third time, Paul discovers the true mercy of failure.

"Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, My power is made perfect in weakness.'"

Now this is one of the great lines of Scripture, but not one easy to understand. ^{difficult to fully comprehend.}

I said that human beings tend to live merely in the service of their own success. I suspect that's true. And to individuals and nations alike, success tends to spell power. Then when we seek to exert power over others we lose it over ourselves. The reason for this seems simple. By nature we are neither humble nor reasonable.

Freud said intelligence is weak, if persistent. And Isaac Bashavis Singer, in accepting his Nobel Prize, pointed out that he though the Almighty was frugal when it came to intellect, lavish when it came to passions and emotions. Among these passions and emotions are, of course, ambition, greed, the instinct to dominate, the needs of the ego, and a whole bundle of personal vanities and anxieties. Only when they are contained do reason and the Holy Spirit have a chance. That's why, I think, God's power is made perfect in weakness.

I am sure that many of you have read "Blessed are the meek", and wondered what that meant. Does that mean we are supposed to become doormats for people

to walk over us? Certainly a lot of Christians act as if that is what it means. But the word in Greek is "praos" and that word "praos" as a verb, refers to the channeling of energies, as in taming horses. Before they could be useful, horses had to be "meeked". In Wycliff's Bible we read, "Blessed are the 'meeked' for they shall inherit the earth".

We are "meeked" by the thorns in our flesh. The mercy of our failures is that they point us toward true success, which reluctantly we have to admit is with God alone. So a "messenger of Satan" can become a servant of God. The Devil's subtraction can become God's addition. If you look at the Cross, you can see two great symbols: a capital "I", a powerful "I" crossed out; and you see a minus turned by God into a plus. "When I am weak, then I am strong".

CLOSING So, dear friends, if you are up for it this week, take your Bibles. Read not only the 12th chapter of II Corinthians, but read also the 4th chapter. Read,

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Christ so that the life of Christ may also be manifested in our bodies."

Then, go to work! Describe to God in detail just how you feel about that thorn in your flesh. And make it sound as full of self-pity and anger, make it sound as trivial as you want. But make it specific. Get it all out. And don't ask for answers: "Lord, just listen to me. I don't want to hear anything". A week later, try it again. Maybe you'll have to do it several times, if you are as angry about one or two thorns in my own life. But I'll tell you something: you get bored with your bitterness. After a while it gets boring just dumping the mud. "I said that last week, Lord. I am beginning to get bored with it this week.". So the third time, you may find that you can begin the process of integration, begin to befriend the enemy. You can take what seems like a defeat at the hand of Satan and turn it into the occasion for the victory God always had in mind for you.

LISTEN TO PAUL AGAIN Let's listen to Paul one more time. "And to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'". And then with a kind of nose-thumbing independence Paul wraps it up with, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities". And he ends on this triumphant note: "For when I am weak, then I am strong".

PRAYER O, God, grant us that grace that may see in weakness thy strength. Free us from all idolatry, so that our loyalty may be to Thee alone, and make us channels of thy grace that we may strive to make humanity more human, through our small but significant lives. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our mirror in whom the weakest among us can find the greatest strength and the ugliest the greatest beauty. In His spirit we pray. Amen