

PENTECOST 6B, 04-07-2021. The Reverend Lorna Green

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

From 2 Corinthians 12: Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

From Mark 6: Jesus left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'

When we go to church we like to hear nice things. We like to hear and say and sing words that are reassuring and comforting, that make us feel better when we leave than when we arrived. I like to talk about those things too: about God's wonderful, all-encompassing love and acceptance and how great it is to know we are part of God's great family.

Sometimes the lectionary readings aren't particularly conducive to this kind of 'sweetness and light' style of preaching- like today's, for instance!

First there's David, finally recognised as king over the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah. That's good, isn't it? But he was a warrior who expanded and maintained his kingdom by killing anyone who threatened it.

David was a musician and a poet, we are told- but he was a man of violence and bloodshed, not a warm and fluffy character by any means. Henry VIII was a musician and a poet as well.....

St Paul was not exactly warm and fluffy either. Before his conversion to Christianity he went around persecuting Christians and encouraging violence towards them.

Afterwards as we know he travelled around telling people about Jesus and suffering persecution himself, as he tells us: he was arrested, beaten, barely escaped with his life more than once, was shipwrecked- but he persevered.

His letters show that he could be angry, sarcastic and scathing- he didn't suffer fools gladly. His letters to the church in Corinth are evidence, as we read his side of his arguments with them. He was not a warm and fluffy person either!

So what about Jesus? Isn't he 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'? Isn't he always kind and loving and soft and warm? Remember when he overturned the tables in the Temple? Or cursed the fig-tree in Jerusalem? Or accused the scribes and Pharisees of hypocrisy? He could be stern and angry when necessary.

In today's gospel reading Jesus had gone home, and the people he'd grown up with 'took offence at him'. They could not accept that one of their own could be anything special- let alone the Son of God! So he left and went to other villages that were glad to have him.

It wasn't only the villagers who rejected them; members of his own family rejected him as well. A couple of chapters ago in Mark's gospel we read that his mother and siblings had tried to 'restrain' him, thinking he must have gone mad.

Jesus didn't write off his family, or ever say that families are bad in themselves. He did say that loyalty to him must take precedence over loyalty to family and warned that his followers would have trouble with their families who may not understand why they would become Christian.

We don't like to think about this aspect of discipleship, or the family conflict that being a person of faith can bring about. Our society- most societies- place very high value on the family, and rightly so. But no family is perfect and some families are deeply damaged or even toxic, unsafe environments for children and adults.

It is hard to have to make a choice between the wants and needs and demands of family and our love for Jesus and desire to follow him. We may not often be confronted by such a choice; or we might make decisions without thinking that it IS a choice. Whatever is the case, this is not comfortable for us.

Paul talks about his incredible heavenly visions and then about the 'thorn in the flesh' that he believed was given to keep him humble. We do not know what this was: a physical ailment or disability, or something different. He chose not to describe it, just to say that through the suffering it caused he learned how to trust in God's grace and to be content.

Suffering, whether of body or mind, can be terrible. God does not inflict suffering on us- Paul says his was given to him by 'a messenger of satan'; but God offers us grace to grow stronger even in our weaknesses. Paul prayed that his thorn in the flesh would be removed, but it wasn't, and he came to see that he could grow and learn because of it.

Some of us are living with thorns in our flesh: an illness or pain or situation that doesn't go away, no matter what we do or how much we pray.

I wonder if it isn't only individuals who have such thorns; maybe groups or organisations or societies can be similarly afflicted. Australian society has, I believe, at least one such thorn and possibly many: situations that we cannot seem to fix, no matter how hard we try, issues we see as 'problems' that just will not go away.

All these years since Australia was colonised and we still haven't got our relationship with First Nations peoples right, and they are still disadvantaged and still suffering.

One in six Australian children live in poverty- in 2021! Family violence is a growing problem, racial discrimination is real, homelessness is increasing, and we don't know how to fix any of it.

There are probably many more 'thorns' you can think of.

What if, instead of sinking into despair, we acknowledge that as we can't make all this go away we must depend on the grace of God? What if we were to honestly ask God to teach us the lessons we need to learn from our thorns?

NAIDOC week begins today and ends next Sunday. NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee. The theme this year is 'Heal Country, heal our nation.' I encourage you to take and read one of the sheets that have the NAIDOC week banner on one side and a statement about this year's theme on the other.

We don't have the answers but neither do we have the option of giving up or ignoring those issues that cause suffering to our country and its people. The least we can do is to be informed, to learn, and to pray.

The Lord be with you.