

A CROWN OF THORNS

(Good Friday Reflections by The Revd Dr Nigel Willis)

[1] The story of the Roman soldiers putting a crown of thorns on the head of Jesus appears in Matthew and Mark's gospels. In Matthew 27:29, after stripping Jesus and putting a scarlet robe on him, the soldiers twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on his head. They then mocked him, saying, 'Hail! King of the Jews!'

[2] The same account is given in Mark (15:17) except that the robe is described as purple.

[3] In John, a broadly similar account is given. Pilate instructed that an inscription be put on the cross in Hebrew, Latin and Greek; 'Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews.' The chief priests protested and said it should be written that he claimed to be king of the Jews. Pilate replies: 'What I have written, I have written.'

[4] The crown of thorns was put on the head of Jesus to hurt him, but mainly to mock him. The Roman soldiers may have been unaware of it, but the use of thorns had a potent symbolism. Early in Genesis (3:17-19), God says to Adam that, as punishment for his sin, thorns shall sprout from the ground to make harvests difficult.

[5] Our English word 'crown' derives from the Latin word '*corona*', which meant a wreath. It seems that, originally, a wreath laid upon one's head was an athletic honour. A hero was given a wreath to wear on the head. It was simple. The symbol gradually became adopted, in ever more elaborate forms, as a symbol of majesty. It was used by Roman emperors. There is irony, paradox, in the wreath becoming a crown.

[6] How ironic that, at this time, we have the corona virus! It is so named because, under a microscope, it has a shape reminiscent of a crown – a corona.

[7] When I was a little boy, growing up in Cape Town, we used to have a lot of what was called ‘Christ Thorn’ in gardens. We had it in ours. Our gardener used to say that Jesus’ crown was made of this plant. I believed him at the time and, to this day, I do not know whether he was spinning a yarn or whether he believed it to be true himself. It was not factually true. That type of plant is not found in the Middle East. Indeed, there are lots of plants in the world that are named ‘Christ Thorn’ or ‘Crown of Thorns’. Many are beautiful. In Notre Dame cathedral there was what was popularly believed to be a relic of the crown of Jesus. It was ‘housed’ in a reliquary. It was not a true relic. The reason is that the plant had a different provenance from that in the vicinity of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. But so valuable is it in the popular imagination that it was rescued during the fire at Notre Dame and has been placed in safe-keeping.

[8] But what fascinated me as a boy was the beauty of the Christ Thorn: it had beautiful red flowers amidst the thorns. The reliquary at Notre Dame is most beautiful.

[9] If you look at most of the great paintings of the world depicting Jesus with the crown of thorns, there is a kind of beauty to the crown. It is as though, consciously or unconsciously, the artists and indeed those who named plants ‘the crown of thorns’ with Jesus in mind, were thinking of the paradox inherent in that beauty.

[10] There is indeed much paradox in the crown of thorns. It was intended as a cruel mockery, a scornful reproach. But Jesus, who was crucified as worse than a common criminal, was more than even the king of the Jews, as Pilate dared to call him. He is king of kings, lord of lords, chief of chiefs, the Prince of Peace.

[11] In my talk on the Fifth Wednesday in Lent, I mentioned that one of the great truths that Jesus taught us is that if you want to begin to ‘get a grip’ on God, if you want to increase your understanding of life and what it is all about, you have to be mindful of paradox. It is there in the Sermon on the Mount, the temptations in the wilderness and over and over again in what Jesus said and did. Think also, for

example, of his utterance about the camel passing through the eye of a needle and the rich young man.

[12] Paradox is acute in Good Friday. The very use of the word ‘Good’ in ‘Good Friday’ is a paradox. It is a time of gloom, regret, sadness, fear and despair. But the Resurrection is not that far away. And, without the crucifixion, there could not have been the Resurrection. Despite the thorns, there is a rich harvest.

[13] This potent imagery, inherent in our remembrance of Jesus’s crucifixion on Good Friday, is deeply relevant to the coronavirus. The coronavirus is a ‘crown of thorns’ of a kind. But I have no doubt that we, in South Africa, shall emerge the better for it. At St George’s church we are going to become ‘tech-savvy’. WE are already in the process of doing so.

[14] May I give two other, larger, examples? For far too long, we have been gripped by an infantilism in our understanding of what makes an economy work, never mind a success. We are, potentially, quite capable of growing at 6 or even 7% per annum. The Eskom crisis has made us all aware that skills, acquired over a period of time, really do matter. The devastation caused by the lockdown will make us ALL aware that you actually do need businesspeople to take it upon themselves to start up, manage and run businesses. And may I mention a very South African story, the question of race? In our ordinary, everyday lives we are putting race behind us. We experience that truth. We see it on television. We see it in a white leader of the opposition supporting a black president at this time of crisis. There are aspects of President Ramaphosa’s approach to the coronavirus with which we, as individuals, may disagree but no one will deny that he is acting in good faith and doing his best in an excruciatingly difficult situation decision. South African politicians who want to play the race card will be cast into the scrapheap of history. Thank God! Thank God, for that!

[15] The coronavirus, this crown of thorns seems to mock us, our ability to exercise dominion over the world. But it will come to symbolise a crux, a turning point in

human history, from which we emerged the better, conscious of the fact that we are all sisters and brothers and must work together for the common good.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



The Wounds in the Hands of Jesus
(Good Friday Reflections by The Revd Anthony Arbuthnot)

As we reflect on the wounds in the hands of Jesus Christ this Good Friday, and we respond to the words Jesus speaks to Thomas after his resurrection: “look at my hands” (John 20:27) we may consider three themes.

First, that as Jesus’s hands are nailed to the cross of his crucifixion today, his wounded hands embody the cross, his wounded hands represent all that the cross means for us today, his hands become a symbol of the cross itself.

And, as we consider the wounded hands of Christ and the cross, we are forcefully reminded that the pain and suffering that Jesus bore for us to bring about our reconciliation with God, is a sign of the outpouring of his infinite love for us and of his unconditional forgiveness. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. With mercy and compassion he shares our human frailty, our every emotion, our suffering, even to the point of death. Paul’s letter to the Romans, Chapter 5, Verse 8 tells us: “Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God’s proof of his love for us.” And as we reflect on the wounded hands of Jesus today with compassion and with empathy, we remember at this time our own suffering and the suffering in our community, and we take comfort in knowing that Jesus shares our pain with us, and with love he strives to heal us.

The wounded hands of Christ and the cross are also a reminder of sacrifice. In the Old Testament sacrifice often referred to the ritual where the blood of animals was given to God from time to time in order to restore relationships with God and with one another. The blood sacrifice of the Old Testament was replaced with Jesus's crucifixion, a sacrifice made once and for all, for all individuals and for communities for all time. Through Christ's sacrifice on the cross our relationship with God and with each another is restored. This we see explained in the 1st letter of Peter, Chapter 2, verses 21 to 24, where we find: "Christ himself suffered on your behalf, and left you an example in order that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, he was guilty of no falsehood.' When he was abused he did not retaliate, when he suffered he uttered no threats, but delivered himself up to him who judges justly. He carried our own sins in his own person on the [cross,] so that we might cease to live for sin and begin to live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

A second theme we may consider today as we reflect on the wounded hands of Christ, is to reflect on the incidents in the four gospels where Jesus's hands are revealed to us, and for us to remember the important part Jesus's hands play in his ministry. And, as we reflect on Jesus's wounded hands, we may consider how we use our own hands to continue his ministry in the world. A verse from the Anglican priest Andrew Hardy's Good Friday hymn written in 1918 reminds us of

this: “O dearest Lord, thy sacred hands - with nails were pierced for me; O shed thy blessing on my hands - that they may work for thee.”

In the four Gospels we see many examples of Jesus using his hands in his ministry. We find an example in his teaching on inclusiveness, his teaching against discrimination towards people or groups of people based on prejudice or for any reason, where he encourages us to build relationships and to grow loving communities. A teaching we hold on to at this time especially, as we look to ways of reaching out to each other without making physical contact – through phone calls for instance, through e-mails or through social media. One of Jesus’s teachings on inclusiveness is shown to us in his calling the little children to him and blessing them. (Mark 10:13-16).

With the touch of his hands Jesus performs miracles of healing, he makes the lame walk, he restores sight to the blind, he cleanses lepers and he heals the sick. Luke tells us in Chapter 22, Verse 49-51, that in the Garden of Gethsemane at the moment of Jesus’s betrayal and arrest, one of his followers “struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘Stop! No more of that!’ Then he touched the man’s ear and healed him.” At the point of his arrest, Jesus rejects violence as he strives to bring about healing and reconciliation.

Another example of Jesus using his hands in his ministry we remembered yesterday, on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, a powerful teaching on humility and servanthood. It is told to us in John's gospel, Chapter 13: "After washing their feet [Jesus] put on his garment and sat down again. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked. 'You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Then if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed our feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.'" (John 13:12-15).

A third theme we may consider as we reflect on the wounded hands of Jesus, is his institution of the Lord's Supper, at the Passover meal, before his trial and crucifixion. Luke's gospel, in Chapter 22, Verses 19-20, tells us that at the Last Supper Jesus "took bread [in his hands], and after giving thanks he broke it, and gave it to [his disciples] with the words: 'This is my body.' In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup, poured out for you, is the new covenant sealed by my blood.'" These words are familiar to us, we say them each time we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, when we share the powerful spiritual and physical nourishment of Holy Communion and we invite the life-giving presence of Christ into our lives; into our hearts, our minds and our souls.

At this time, while services of Holy Eucharist have been suspended in our Diocese, and as we reflect on the wounded hands of Christ, we continue to invite

the real presence of Christ into our lives as we pray a Spiritual Communion, in words that are printed in our Prayer Books on Page 516. The *Anima Christi* or ‘Soul of Christ.’ We may pray a Spiritual Communion for ourselves, for each other or inclusively, for our community:

“Soul of Christ, sanctify us.

Body of Christ, save us.

Blood of Christ, refresh us.

Water from the side of Christ, wash us.

Passion of Christ, strengthen us.

O good Jesus, hear us

Within your wounds hide us.

Let us never be separated from you.

From the malicious enemy defend us.

In the hour of my death call us - and bid us come to you

That with your saints we may praise you – for ever and ever.

Amen.” (From ‘*An Anglican Prayer Book : 1989*’ Page 526).

Scripture references are from: ‘*The Revised English Bible.*’

Reflecting on the wound in Jesus' side
(Good Friday Reflections by The Revd Eben Grobbelaar)

On Good Friday, we experience the manifestation of the paschal mystery. The Eucharist relives the paradox of ultimate goodness and sorrow, joy and the seriousness that should capture our hearts and flood it with faith of the Good News of the Christ event.

Hanging on the cross, Jesus is bruised and broken; then comes the final blow – a spear being thrust into the side of Jesus' body, from where blood and water then flows. In iconographic tradition, a scene typically depicts Mary catching up the blood and water into a cup, symbolising the cup of salvation. Therefore we mix the wine during the Eucharistic feast with blessed water to demonstrate the reality of the divine and human natures of Christ.

The cup contains the real presence of Our Lord, and within the liturgy we pray and acclaim its function according to Our Lord's institution as the cup of a new covenant/testament. This covenantal relationship is that of Jesus being the second Adam, which St Paul speaks about in his letter to the Romans. It is a restorative covenant of the presence of God when humanity experienced the closeness of their greatest lover in the Garden of Eden. God walked with humans, side-by-side, in their sharing of the same Image/likeness.

The wound in Jesus' side is significant in Judaic theology as Eve was taken from Adam's side. It is not about gender politics – that will come later with the Fall, as God indicates that the tension between man and woman will prevail – but it actually signifies equality in that Eve was taken from Adam's side, so that they can live side-by-side, not one over or beneath the other. They were both created to represent the image of God in unity.

The scar in Adam's side was a type of circumcision of the covenantal relationship, but it soon became a corrupted sign of broken relations. The humility was replaced

by suspicion, power struggles, betrayal and fear. This is the story of humanity. We exploit even the brokenness to make a profit and enforce protectionism.

The current Covid-19 pandemic reveals a measure of xenophobia, ethnocentricity and even generational privilege. No efforts of humans seem to offer sustainable solutions to the brokenness and to humanity's inability to live in harmony with itself and nature. Except that Jesus, the perfect human person, had his side pierced to open a way into his heart where we can experience reconciliation with the Father and with one other.

Restored relationships are deeply spiritual, but it is Christ Jesus that becomes the one who breaks the cycle forever through his love and free will. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is hailed as the one Lamb slain for the sins of the world. He stands in divine solidarity because of the wound he bears. His wounds are transformative, empowering and a positive force in that he becomes vulnerable, virtuously broken and die so that others may experience salvation.

Being therefore in relationship with God, taken into his heart, we don't regard people as commodities, but as community. We remain trusting of people, despite being betrayed, and give though we are exploited, so that we are proactive in giving the salvation of Christ to the world. We cannot do this in our own willpower; it is a work of the Spirit of God in us, giving life to our mortal bodies as we partake of the spiritual food in the Eucharist – knowing that we share the same cup with our sisters and brother in one community to represent that life is found through others.

The wound in Jesus' side marks us as well, as we become humble, show empathy and die to ourselves in order that others may believe, trust again and live forgiven. People living a lifestyle that accords with being wounded-ones most visibly share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.