

"A Crown of Thorns"

Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 2018

[Pass the baskets with the crowns of thorns at the beginning.]

When you visit the Holy Land, you can walk down the Mount of Olives until you arrive at the Garden of Gethsemane. [9 PALM SUNDAY WALK]

It is known as the Palm Sunday Walk in memory of Jesus and his journey into Jerusalem on a donkey to shouts of "Hosanna!"--just days before the crowds would shout "Crucify Him!" Along the way is a beautiful little church known as "Dominus Flevit" (meaning "The Lord wept"). **[9 DOMINUS FLEVIT CHURCH]**

The church was constructed between 1953 and 1955 designed by the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi. Barluzzi designed it in the shape of a tear drop, remembering Jesus looking over Jerusalem and weeping—for their blindness and their lack of understanding that God's Messiah was in their very midst.

And I believe he wept for us...

Traditionally, Catholic churches are built facing the east because that is the direction from which Messiah is predicted to return, but interestingly, Barluzzi built Dominus Flevit facing west. Why? So that it would face Jerusalem and he installed a beautiful window behind the altar so that worshippers would see this: **[10 DOMINUS FLEVIT WINDOW]** Do you notice the horizontal piece of stained glass that reminds us of the crown of thorns?

Just outside the church, our tour guide showed us a tree **[11 CROWN OF THORNS TREE]** on the property known as the "**Crown of Thorns tree**" a possible example of the plant for the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head by Roman soldiers prior to his crucifixion.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 15:16-20

The religious leadership has betrayed him.

His disciple Judas has betrayed him.

Peter has betrayed him three times around a courtyard fire.

And now, even the crowd (maybe some who shouted "Hosanna!"..."Save Us!" a few days earlier) have betrayed him.

Judas handed him over to the Jewish leadership,

who handed him over to the High Priest Caiaphas,

who handed him over to Pontius Pilate,

who has handed him over to a whole Roman cohort (500 soldiers),

who are now making sport of him to humiliate him.

He had already been beaten mercilessly.

And now a crown of thorns.

Have you ever had a simple splinter in your finger and experienced how painful that little thing can be?

And yet, on top of everything else he had suffered, Jesus now had a crown of thorns thrust on his head. This morning, we are receiving another symbol to add to our Lenten cross... a crown of thorns. And I wanted you to have it in hand as we think about what Jesus experienced and the meaning it might have for us.

The thorns remind us that Jesus was fully human. In a way that makes no sense from a mathematical perspective, Jesus was 100% fully divine and 100% fully human. Jesus was both a carpenter and itinerant rabbi from Nazareth, but he was also the very presence of God on the cross at Calvary.

In the early church, there were those that claimed he was divine, but that his humanity was just an illusion.

He only "seemed" to suffer; he only "seemed" to bleed; he only "seemed" to die. But the Church said "No!" That is heresy!

Our Lord was as fully human as he was divine.

He got hungry and thirsty in the wilderness.

He wept when his friend Lazarus died.

I think he laughed and danced at wedding in Cana... and enjoyed the wine!

And he felt the pain of every strike of the rod and every thorn on his brow.

And why does that matter! It matters because Jesus knows what it feels like to be human.

He is acquainted with grief and sorrow; disappointment and betrayal and pain.

He knows what it feels like to be exhausted and even anxious.

Jesus himself prayed to God: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. But not my will, but your will be done." His faith did not eliminate his fear.

There is nothing you have experienced that Jesus does not understand.

There is nothing you are feeling that Jesus has not felt.

And there is nothing that is going to happen to you to which Jesus is a stranger.

The good news is that Jesus is present with us even now through the power of the Holy Spirit to accompany us on your journey... to bring comfort and assurance. He knows. He understands.

Our Lord knew that his "world-changing" teachings of God's love and forgiveness would cost him everything, but he was willing to suffer for us and for our salvation that we might be reconciled to God by faith in his mercy and grace.

Jesus knew the pain of the thorn.

The Apostle Paul spoke of a "thorn" in his life. Paul said this in one of his letters to the church in Corinth:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this [thorn], 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 weakness, 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. (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

"When I am weak, then I am strong."

How could that be? Paul knew that it was in his times of weakness, in those "thorny" times of life, that Christ was near and that in his weakness, he could lean into Christ's strength.

When the thorns are pricking, Christ is there and he knows and he understands. Our faith in Jesus does not remove the thorns, any more than it removes the storms that come into our lives.

In fact, as followers of Jesus, we can count on the thorns...

When we love as Jesus calls us to love, then we will be vulnerable.

When we love others, they may not love us back, or they may betray us.

When we forgive, we give up our right to get even.

When we share what we have, others may waste it.

When we reach out, we may be rejected.

But when we love, we are never more like Christ.

And when we love, we are joining Christ in his work in the world.

Thorns and all...

Let us pray.

Jesus knows you and he knows what you are dealing with today and he is walking with you. What are you dealing with today?

(Disappointment

The Apostle Paul... drawing us closer to God.

Thorns will be part of our journey and our ministry as Christians.