

Thorn Shadow

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Martha Mary Chapel at the Wayside Inn

Matthew 27.27-31 (NRSV)

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

What kind of shadow?

Among the extant writings of St. Chromatius, a church father from the early 5th century, there are a number of treatises on Matthew's Gospel. In one of them he comments on the thorny crown: "The crown of thorns which the Lord received on his head stands for our community, which came to faith from the Gentiles. At one time we were thorns — that is to say, sinners. Believing now in Christ, we have become a crown of righteousness, for we no longer cause pain or harm to the Savior. Rather, we surround his head with our profession of faith while we praise the Father in the Son...."¹

With all due respect for the good bishop, I'm not so sure. Would that we Christians were always a crown of righteousness upon Christ's head. But all too obviously we are still very much sinners and our lives still press upon the brow of our Lord the sharp thorns of our sinfulness.

Perhaps that's why the painting, an image of which is before you, so gripped my heart and mind. Every night this week at my congregation we have pondered a contemporary religious painting and the one we look at today may be the most riveting.

It's called "Thorn Shadow" by a Chicago-based artist named Dan Addington. He painted on wood with dark oils and tar which absorb the light. He juxtaposed with the dark strokes a fleshy, translucent wax which holds and embodies light. He wanted this pared-down image to communicate profound truths: the weighty darkness of the crucifixion and the transcendent promise it held. In other words, Jesus' crown of thorns casts a shadow and in that shadow there is blessing.

Think about this. The words shadow or shadows occur many times in the Bible, depending on the English translation, between 43 and 80 times.² Most often, the shadow in the Bible is negative. We walk through the "valley of the shadow of death" as Psalm 23 famously expresses it. But the shadow isn't just about death or the fear of death. The shadow also describes how fleeting and insubstantial our lives are. 1 Chronicles says, "For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope." (29.15) In his suffering, Job cries out, "We are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are

¹ Manlio Simonetti, ed., "Matthew 14-28," *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament, vol. 1b (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 286.

² Contemporary English Version: 43; New Revised Standard Version: 46; New International Version: 51; King James Version: 80.

but a shadow.” (8.9) Job also mourns: “A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last.” (14.1-2)

But there is one other kind of shadow in the Bible, the only good kind of shadow. “Guard me as the apple of your eye,” says the psalmist, and “hide me in the shadow of your wings.” (17.8) “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” (36.7) “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.” (57.1)

So all these images bounced around in my mind this week. The thorny crown as the sins of the world pressed down on the brow of the Lord. And not just the world’s sins, but my sins and yours. The thorns cast a shadow — the darkness and the lostness of our lives without God. But the Bible also talks about the shadow of God’s wings where there is healing and wholeness and hope. How do we get from the dark shadow to the shadow of blessing?

The mystics see this best. Julian of Norwich wrote that there is “a great unity between Christ and us ... for when he was in pain we were in pain, and all creatures able to suffer pain suffered with him.... So was our Lord Jesus afflicted for us; and we all stand in this way of suffering with him, and shall till we come to his bliss.”³

We suffer the thorns of our sins and Christ suffers our sins too. And in that suffering, by the mercy of God, comes salvation. The shadow of the thorny crown is the shadow of blessing. That is the miracle of Good Friday.

I read an example of that miracle in a warmhearted story that Tom Long tells in his book *Testimony*. He had published an article in which he argued that children should be present every week in the regular worship services. No junior church. No babysitting. He insisted that worship should be truly intergenerational.

A Christian educator who read that article telephoned him to express appreciation for what he wrote. Dr. Long basked for awhile in her praise, but then she said, “There’s just one thing. We’d like you to come to our church and show us how to do it.” He protested that he was just writing an article. But she insisted. So he went.

With the help of that Christian educator, they planned a wonderful service to be held in the fellowship hall of the church on Sunday afternoon. Families would sit at tables set with flour, water, and yeast. Adults and children would mix the ingredients into bread dough, and while they were kneading it, they would talk with each other about their faith. Then the dough would be taken to the adjacent kitchen to be baked, and while the aroma of baking bread wafted through fellowship hall, Tom would preach an intergenerational sermon, followed by the Lord’s Supper using the bread that the families had made. It was a lovely plan.

It was a disaster. It rained hard that Sunday morning and by the time families arrived, children had been unhappily cooped up inside all day. Families were in a bad mood and the kids were too hyper. The dough kneading got out of control. Children were crying, chairs were being knocked over, tired parents were testy, and some of the older kids were throwing wads of wet dough across the room. Clouds of flour dust filled the room.

The baking didn’t go well either. The ovens were painfully slow, and the bread took an

³ *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge, OSA and James Walsh, SJ (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 210-211.

eternity to bake. Trying to cover the time, Dr. Long preached too long and by the end the room was cacophonous. Parents were yelling, babies were crying, children were screaming. For the finale, the script called for Tom to raise his hands over this uproar and give a blessing. “The peace of Christ be with you all.” There was no peace but Tom was too tired and frustrated to think of anything else. So he just said it. “The peace of Christ be with you all.”

Then a miracle occurred. Out of the chaos came a child’s voice. When Tom Long said, “The peace of Christ be with you all,” somewhere out there in the clamor a little girl simply said, “It already is.” That’s all she said, “It already is.” In the middle of a room in uproar — or maybe even in the middle of a world in uproar — she already knew the peace of Christ.⁴

That’s our hope, dear friends, a hope that comes from what happened on this day. A thorn shadow — the thorns of our sins, transformed by the sufferings of Christ, to become the healing refuge of the shadow of God’s wings. Therefore, the peace of Christ be with you all. Amen

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) 41.