

THE CROWN OF THORNS

Karen Eifler

'And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head and clothed him in a purple cloak.' (John 19:2)

FOR SOME TIME NOW, it's been the spiked brambles woven into a crown of thorns that most haunts me in the story of Jesus' passion. Whether from cacti in the deserts that I've visited or humble blackberry bushes nearer home, I've learnt the pain that a single thorn prick can inflict on tender skin.

The soldiers must have experienced some pain themselves in crafting that crown. The act of weaving is not a quick process, but deliberate and methodical, and it is impossible to handle thorns without piercing one's own fingers. My mind wanders to the image of a soldier, egged on by the others, creating the crown from branches gathered by the group as the cruel idea took shape among them. Perhaps he was the youngest and needed to prove himself. Or was he a fringe member of the squad, seeking acceptance by carrying out this small act of barbarity? Or the clown of the group, making monstrous fun with the outrageous notion that this humble one could be the King of the Jews? I can imagine each of these possibilities.

As a teacher, during countless break-times I have watched lonely children latch onto the smallest difference in the new kid to make themselves seem more important. I remember Alex, the smallest boy in his class, who had mild learning disabilities. In a small school, everyone knew Alex's limitations well enough to keep the taunts of 'pipsqueak' and 'retard' alive and well for most of his career there—until Paulo moved into Alex's class, fresh from Nicaragua, speaking no English. Alex could have seized the opportunity to form a new friendship with a fellow outsider unaware of his history with the group. But instead he led the way in ridiculing Paulo, from his pronunciation of English words to his lack of familiarity with the playground pursuits of the other boys. Alex seemed to forget that these were the same boys who regularly made his

The Way, 46/3 (July 2007), 85–87

own life miserable; he clung to whatever favour he thought he was receiving as he hurled his own barbs at Paulo. Sadly for Alex, his respite from adolescent social hell hardly lasted long enough to savour. When the spring soccer season rolled around, Paulo, who lived and breathed the sport, became playground royalty—not just with the boys, who admired his skill, but with the blossoming girls, who suddenly found Paulo and his accent exotic.

Although it is easier on my own ego to do so, I should not limit my reflections to memories of other people who have ultimately been harmed by their own cruelty. What make my own fingers bleed are the times I know I have inflicted pain on someone else, in however small a way. I am haunted by the stricken look on a friend's face when she overheard me telling our friends about her crush on a boy we knew, and by the memory of the silent, stunned look I earned from my first boss when he witnessed my clever impression of his slight stutter. That same summer, on a backpacking holiday, I filled the boots of our group leader with marshmallows. It seemed like a joke at the time, but afterwards it occurred to me that it would take me a lot longer to earn back his trust and respect than the few minutes we had spent giggling about the prank. I am embarrassed when I remember thorns I have inflicted on other people through unkind words and thoughtless actions, but those memories bring me back to an important message that I take from the story of the crown of thorns.

The Roman soldiers who wove the crown of thorns and pressed it onto Jesus' head were nameless henchmen, but they wiped their own blood from their hands after the deed as well as Jesus'. They knew the long road from Pilate's headquarters to Golgotha. They knew that Jesus would stumble, crushed by the weight of the cross; and they were determined that the crown should stay put. The only way to achieve this was to push down hard; and in doing so they will also have punctured their own skin. They may have carried the physical scars of their barbarity for a long time. The memories of my own meanness likewise feel like scars; years later I cringe and want to distance myself from the person who could have done certain things. Deliberate cruelty to others doesn't just diminish us; it inflicts some of the same pain on us as we inflict on our victims.

The fact that this image is so compelling to me makes me wonder what I need to learn about wearing a crown of thorns. Lately, an answer has been coming to me. In the great 'Amen' of the Eucharist, I assent to sharing in the cross as well as in the resurrection: there can be no empty tomb without the tortuous journey to Calvary. And so I must share the

crown of thorns as well. What do I hear in the silence as those barbs dig into my own head? 'Stop intellectualising. Feel. Be.'

I recognise my intellect as a gift. But sometimes using it can make me less generous and spontaneous, and can make my cruel impulses more hurtful. My mind is capable of rationalising all sorts of sins, petty and profound. The worst thing is to use rationalisation to avoid confronting true injustice, in order to escape the consequences of the confrontation. Elie Wiesel offers a prickly antidote to my capacity for rationalising good deeds left undone: 'to remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all'.

It occurs to me that the placing of the crown of thorns *on the head* is an important hint in thinking about my relationships and the role of the mind in them. While I would never countenance the use of self-inflicted physical pain, perhaps the image of the crown of thorns is calling me to make a conscious effort towards shifting energy from my mind to my heart, the seat of my connection with other people. Perhaps the crown of thorns in my contemplation and prayer invites me to balance heart and mind. The blood drawn by those brambles came from Jesus' heart. Heart and brain are mutually dependent: a brain will cease to function without adequate blood supply, while a heart will stop beating on its own without continuous regulation from the brain. The pain that I feel when confronted with memories of my hurtfulness is more than a mental exercise; my heart hurts afterwards. Meditating on the crown of thorns has led me to understand that we cannot just contemplate, we must also *feel*, in order to be whole. Our culture tends to value observable facts over emotion. However, we should also cherish the lessons that come through the heart, that source of healing tears and ecstatic laughter. There are no icons of the 'Sacred Mind'; it is the image of the Sacred Heart that calls us to consider laying down our lives for a friend. And surrounding that Sacred Heart? A wreath of thorns ...

Karen Eifler, of Portland, Oregon, in the United States, taught maths and religion to adolescents for several years before earning her doctorate in educational psychology and finding a new vocation as a teacher-educator at the University of Portland.

