

Sixth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "The King's Speech, a Thorn in the Flesh, God's Grace"

2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

July 3-4, 2021

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

*The King's Speech* is a movie some of you have probably seen. If you haven't, I recommend it! It's about Queen Elizabeth II's father, George VI. *The King's Speech* isn't about any particular speech George VI gave. It's rather about his struggle to overcome a **speech impediment**, a pronounced stammer/stutter.

This man (whom family members called Bertie) did not seem cut out to be king. He was shy and reserved and suffered from anxiety. He had no desire to be king and no reason to believe he'd ever **become** king. His older brother, Edward VIII, was **already** king -- until Edward VIII abdicated the throne on December 10, 1936, in order to marry his sweetheart, American divorcee Wallis Warfield Simpson. (With Harry and Meghan, history is repeating itself in a way.)

George VI was a good man and a good king. He was thrust into that royal role just a month after Hitler's minions carried out the Kristallnacht destruction of Jewish property and terrorized German Jews (Nov. 9-10, '36). He became royal head of the British Empire as Europe was moving inexorably toward war. He inspired his people with his courage, faith and fortitude during World War II, including the Battle of Britain, over a year's worth of bombing raids against London and other English cities. The King chose not to retreat to the safety of Canada. He and the family remained in Buckingham Palace, which was bombed as he and his wife had morning tea.

Since it's Independence Day weekend, I have to mention that George VI was the first British king ever to visit the United States of America, a trip he made in 1939. He and the

Queen Mum traveled to Washington, D.C., NYC and -- Poughkeepsie! (Go figure.) The reason I mention him now is the reference to “the thorn in the flesh” in today’s epistle. I think the king had at least 2 thorns in the flesh: his inherent shyness and his lifelong stammer, both of which were significant hurdles for him to clear in the leadership role thrust upon him by fate. (I stuttered when I was a child, so I have great empathy for him.)

Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about some unidentified problem that plagues him. *The Message* rephrasing of the thorn in the flesh passage goes like this:

*...so I wouldn't get a big head I was given **the gift of a handicap** to keep me in constant touch with my limitations... Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger than of walking around high and mighty! (2 Corinthians 12:7, *The Message*)*

Ah, and once on our knees, we’re more apt to remember to pray!

We don’t know what handicap Paul is talking about. Lots of ink has been spilled wondering what it was. Luther thought it very well might have been lack of support and open vying for power by local religious leaders who bucked Paul’s authority and liked to point out he **wasn’t** one of the 12 apostles, after all, and had **never** met the Lord Jesus in person. (Luther’s similar experience of rejection and ridicule may have sent his thoughts in that direction....) Calvin favored the idea that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was some kind of spiritual temptation, like the impulse to give up on what was a very difficult ministry, or a temptation toward spiritual pride, or even doubt in what he was preaching. Modern students of Scripture tend to lean toward the thorn in the flesh being some physical ailment. Guesses include but aren’t confined to epilepsy, eye trouble, migraine headaches or intermittent malarial fever, any of which wouldn’t have necessarily stopped him dead in his tracks, but certainly slowed him down and made him miserable.

I've suffered from migraines along the way, and have often thought, "Lord, you know, I could serve you a lot better and get a lot more done if this darn headache would go away!" I'm guessing most of us have **some** "thorn in the flesh" we could do without and wish we could pray away! "Lord, if I didn't have cancer...." "Lord, if it weren't so painful to walk...." "Lord, if this cloud of depression would just lift...." "Lord, if I weren't so dang anxious so much of the time...." "Lord, if I weren't preoccupied with this craving for...." What's **your** thorn in the flesh? What's your "handicap" that sure seems like burden instead of blessing, gut punch instead of gift?

Paul prays three times, "Lord, I beg you, take out Your divine tweezers and remove this thorn in my flesh!"

*...but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:9)*

Some folks think the Bible is a dusty, historically timebound book of ancient history, of no practical use with no modern application. Wrong! This verse is one of the gems we can carry along with us wherever we go, a treasure to strengthen us in times that threaten us:

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*

Honestly, I would prefer that God's power be made perfect in me in strength, not weakness. I don't know about you, but being vulnerable is scary to me. However, the Lord knows that a sense of self-sufficiency doesn't draw me closer to God. If I convince myself I can manage on my own, I have no felt need for God. Yet Jesus says very clearly, "Blessed are those who know their need of God." ("Blessed are the poor in spirit." Matt. 5:3)

Paul goes on to say (in the paraphrase from *The Message*):

*At first I didn't think of [the handicap] as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that... Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size – abuse, accidents, opposition, bad*

*breaks. I just let Christ take over. And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become. (2 Corinthians 12:8,10)*

George III was king of the British Empire during the Revolutionary War. His descendant George VI, also a wartime monarch, was a very different man, humble rather than arrogant, looking to serve rather than be served. His purity of heart showed itself in the selflessness with which he served in a difficult role he never desired, and the dogged persistence with which he worked to overcome the handicap he feared would diminish his ability to project strength for his people in their time of great need. I wonder if he loved and gravitated toward this passage about the thorn in the flesh.... If he repeated this mantra for himself:

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*

When you struggle with whatever your handicap is, may you also hear the Lord say:

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*

In those frustrating, painful moments, when our handicap hobbles us, may we remember to

*...just let Christ [our King] take over. Amen*

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham