

Good Friday 3rd April 2026 - The Crown of Thorns

John 18:33-37

Mother Emma

In our first reading, we heard that Pilate did indeed hand Jesus over to be flogged, but also that after this vicious punishment the soldiers took their opportunity to mock and humiliate him, putting on him a purple robe and twisting thorns to make a crown for his head. The traditional image of the Crown of Thorns, with vicious spikes ripping the flesh around Jesus' head, has become an icon of Christ's patient and painful suffering, reproduced in art, sculpture and poetry, and no doubt also in our own heads when we think of images of the crucifixion. We are aware of the traditional irony that the soldiers are mocking Jesus for claiming to be a king, when we know that he is indeed the King of Heaven.

Yet I was fascinated when researching for this reflection to discover that a recently published thesis offers a whole new layer of meaning to the crown of thorns, which can expand our understanding, our contemplation and our learning from this famous image. The writer, Faith Tibble, notes that in the original Greek, the words used are not explicitly "crown of thorns", but "wreath of acanthus." The word "stephanos" can be used for either crowns or wreaths, and "acanthus" could be used to mean a generic, possibly prickly plant, but it was St Jerome's translation into Latin in the fourth century which immortalised it as "crown of thorns". Even then religious art and imagery did not show the traditional crown of thorns of our imaginings at any point before the 11th century. One or two early fourth-century images show Jesus being crowned with a wreath; others do not include the crown, any more than the purple robe, in images of the crucifixion or of his walk to the Cross. From the 11th century, we start to see the pictures we would recognise – crowns with long vicious thorns, worn not only when the soldiers mocked him, but throughout the crucifixion itself. But perhaps today we could consider what it might have meant for Jesus to have been crowned by the soldiers using a "wreath of acanthus".

Acanthus, as many of us will know, is an ancient and prolific plant, difficult to eradicate (there are certainly lots in the Vicarage garden)! In our climate, the leaves are soft and attractive; in drier, harsher terrain with more threats, they are edged with tiny thorns containing minute amounts of poison, producing an agonising ache. Acanthus might well have resulted in as much pain as the more dramatic thorns we see pictured since the Middle Ages.

But in Graeco-Roman times, the acanthus (probably due to its persistence, and its ability to regenerate from even a tiny surviving bit of root) was associated not only with healing, but with regeneration, resurrection and re-birth. Perhaps the soldiers were aware of this themselves and were cruelly making fun of the fact that Jesus' followers had believed he could overcome death; in any case, the connotations would not have been lost on the followers themselves, or on the Gospel-writers who recorded his story. Jesus is being crowned with a plant signifying Resurrection and hope.

And what of the wreath, if that is how one translates the word? In Roman times, the highest accolade for a military general was known as a “grass crown”, which was only awarded to a general by all his soldiers if he saved them from certain death through exceptional leadership. It took the form of a wreath was woven from plants growing at the site of the great rescue. It is possible to think that the soldiers, once again in their mockery, were portraying Jesus as a failed general – one who had promised to save his followers from death, but who instead appeared to be facing certain death himself. And here too, we can imagine that his early followers would have seen in this wreath, the accolade given to a leader who had in every sense saved his people from death by rising again and bringing them the promise of eternal life.

The suggestion of the “wreath of acanthus” may jolt our familiar image of the “Crown of Thorns”, but it can broaden, rather than undermine, the multi-faceted interpretation of the soldiers’ mockery, and of Jesus’ true nature as understood by those of his own time. Whether involving tiny poisoned prickles or long, sharp thorns, there is no doubt that the soldiers’ actions were intended to prolong his suffering and punishment, but the additional layer of meaning brought by the use of acanthus leaves helps us to see even more deeply into the parallel viewpoints of the soldiers and the disciples.

In the reading we just heard, Jesus is asked, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” His response “*My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews*”, anticipates the soldiers’ mocking that he is both a failed king and a failed military leader. In earthly (particularly Graeco-Roman) terms, he could be interpreted as both of these.

The Romans were used to uprisings in Judaea, often led by charismatic prophets or messiah-figures, who talked about salvation and promised to overthrow their Roman occupiers using military force. These were viciously and violently suppressed, and it is highly likely that this is how Pilate and his soldiers viewed Jesus and the crowds his preaching attracted. But the irony of the acanthus wreath is that for those who understand Jesus’ victory over death, he is to be acclaimed as a great leader who did indeed save his people. We see prefigured in the acanthus’ traditional associations with resurrection, the bursting from the Tomb which we shall celebrate on Sunday, and within the very suffering and humiliation which it caused, we are led to an understanding of the glory of the victory to come.

As we stand today at the foot of the Cross, a new interpretation of the Crown of Thorns may give us the opportunity to enter once again into the agony of Christ’s suffering, but also to glimpse a fresh foreshadowing of his glory.

Amen