

Oh, you know, something really bad has happened. Ah but I can't tell you. Oh but have you heard about...Aah sorry, I've been sworn to secrecy.

One of the very best ways of getting somebody's attention and keeping it is, well, not to tell them something. It's a good way of tormenting somebody too, but that's by the by. Nothing get us determined to find out more than refusing to tell us. Nothing is more tantalizing, more annoying, more exasperating, more frustrating, more fascinating, more impossible to ignore, than a secret you know someone knows but won't tell you. This is about the only card clergy have in their hand, so it's no surprise that we'll never, but never tell.

Of course, experience should tell us that the gap in our knowledge from a withheld truth is almost always a whole lot less interesting than what our imagination fills in, but then we're remarkably slow learning from experience. What we imagine a persons's secret to be can, of course, tell us an awful lot about ourselves, our concerns, obsessions, worries and prejudices.

Not just in the daily round of tittle tattle does the mystery of withheld information exert its attraction.

Several generations now have thrilled and chilled, fascinated to wonder what happened to the crew of the Marie Celeste. Apparently, not quite what everybody knows; what we all know is a story written by Arthur Conan Doyle based on a report he saw in newspaper: he uses all his author's art to exaggerate the tale to play on our taste for mystery. The truth is more prosaic: the crew abandoned ship, in the lifeboats, probably something to do with the large amount of alcohol she was carrying. But there is no real interest for us in that: far more appealing the aura of mysterious secrets straight from the imagination of Sherlock Home's creator.

Authorial embellishments apart, there are real historical mysteries that have fascinated generations because they likely will never now know the answer to the questions they raise. Where did Agatha Christie disappear to in December 1926? What happened to the Viking settlers on Greenland? What about Lord Longford? Did Queen Elizabeth I sleep with Thomas Seymour or did she really die a virgin? How can we have a Conservative government when nobody, apparently, voted for them? And the biggest mystery of them all: the England football squad?

Even faith, the place for certainties and eternal truths, has its teasers, secrets we will never know. What was the name of Lot's wife? Who was the young man who ran away naked from the garden of Gethsemane? Who was the disciple Jesus loved? All these have received a fair amount of attention through the ages, and today's New Testament reading contains another of those scriptural secrets. [scuttle over to St Paul' letters and the mysteries deepen. There's the whole of Romans for a start and then for today unexplained prickle in 2 Corinthians which has even entered proverbial English as the thorn in the side. But] What was the thorn in St Paul's flesh? You might have thought, with all his soaring theology and dubious views on women, gays, and slaves, Christians through the centuries would have passed by the tantalizing omission (we heard in today's New Testament reading), but attention to and speculation about Paul's unnamed affliction has been constant and fervent and quite often, as you might expect, tells us more about the person making the educated guess than the the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul, in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians has been boasting to them about an experience he had fourteen years previously, when he was granted a vision of the third heaven. When he came down to earth, it was with a jolt.

*To stop me from getting too proud I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me and stop me from getting too proud!*

What was the thorn in St Paul's flesh? Paul doesn't tell us, so many have tried to guess through the years what precisely it was that was pricking Paul. Many have come to the conundrum seeking poetic justice for indignities that future generations have inflicted on them in Paul's name. Later come those trying to be scientific, sifting and sniffing out symptoms from the descriptions of Paul's life. Was it a stroke Paul had: that's what the road to Damascus experience looks like to an atheist cynic? Or a stammer perhaps: certainly in his first letter to the Corinthians he suggests he was not a good public speaker. Surely God would not seek to keep Paul from presumption with male pattern baldness, though from the earliest days he was described, visually, as short and bald? What was that thorn in St Paul's flesh? My personal theory, is that perhaps after God had whisked Paul up in ecstasy up to the third heaven, when he got back, just to stop him getting too big for his boots, he gave him the world's first church hall.

Not convinced? So what was that thorn? We might say, does it matter? Isn't this really some sort of slightly off not-so-pious parlour game? Something to think about

during the tedium of an extra-long sermon or a mental exercise to while away the virtual hours of imprisonment of Prayer Book matins?

In the bigger scheme of things, well, no what that thorn was probably doesn't matter, but Paul's interpretation of his particular trouble, does matter to us as 21st century Christians, and in two particular ways.

The first, of course, is the more obvious lesson about pride, Adam's first sin, the Achilles heel of humanity. It is very easy for any of us to think ourselves the big 'I am' and it's a failing that can be a particular and present danger for religious leaders, Paul particularly. He was singled out by Christ on his mission, personally picked on the road to Damascus and then later taken on a private VIP trip to the heavenly realms. Small wonder if he suddenly found himself going up a few hat sizes. And no wonder if God made sure he punctured his pride and never forgot who the boss was.

The second lesson, though, is slightly less obvious, and it can be very easy to draw the opposite conclusion when we hear St Paul's words. It is easy to hear the tale of Paul's God-given thorn and then assume that all the heartaches and heartbreaks, the miseries and melancholies, the trials, tribulations, slings and arrows that afflict every life are God's doing, teaching us a lesson perhaps, testing us maybe or punishing us. Except perhaps we are a religious leader who have been whisked up to the third heaven- hands up anyone- we would be wrong. We cannot generalise from the specific of St Paul to the general of us.

Life, not God, gives us crosses to bear. Pretty much most of the time there is no rhyme or reason to their distribution; the way they are handed out is to all intents and purposes random. God creates and sustains life in the first place, there is nothing that happens in the world that is not held in his hands; but it is quite a leap of reasoning to go on from there to say that, having thus created and sustained us, he delights in giving us repeated good, hard, slaps across the face. He reserves that, so it seems, for his apostles.

If God is not, for us at least, there giving out our individual thorns, those barbs can still, very much, for us as for St Paul, be a way for us to grow closer to God, to deepen our understanding of Him, to see more clearly his presence in our lives and His purpose for them.

Nothing focuses the mind and heart quite as sharply as suffering. But we *can* gain immeasurably in that suffering if it increases our focus on Jesus. We don't need to suffer to do that. But if we can use suffering to increase our faith, all the better for us.

Nobody wants the thorn in their side. Nobody gets benefits from thorns that they couldn't get elsewhere less painfully. But there are thorn patches in every life and from the pain they inflict, we can weave crowns.