

“A PASSION FOR YOU”

Matthew 27:32-56

At the end of last month, when I was last in the pulpit on a Sunday, we were looking at how, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live lives of **passion** and **purity** – a real **passion** for Jesus as the focus of our faith, out of which should flow lives that are characterised by holiness and integrity: **purity**. In order to do that we need to put down **roots** into God’s word, into prayer and into fellowship, but primarily into a **relationship** with Jesus. The big question that some have asked since then is “Why?” *Why* do we need to live like this?

The danger is that we concentrate on those things to the extent that eventually we believe we are working our way into God’s good books, that it’s our behaviour that determines our status before God now and our eventual eternal destiny. But that’s not what it’s all about. We are not trying to work our way into God’s favour by trying to live in a holy way or trying to generate a passion for Jesus Christ. As so often seems to be the case when we talk about such things, it’s exactly the opposite. We have already found favour with God. He has already showered us with his grace. What we are doing is not trying to get God on our side, but responding to the fact that he is already on our side. We are responding to the passion that Jesus has shown for us.

As I’m sure you’re aware, the word “passion” today really means a deep love, a devotion, an emotional outpouring. If we have a passion for Jesus we are devoted to him, we have a great love for him. Today is Passion Sunday and it refers, of course, to the love that Jesus has for us, but it’s more to do with the original meaning of the word which has within it a strong element of suffering. The Latin word from which it is derived means suffering rather than love. I suppose we might sum it up now as the suffering love of Jesus for us, or the love that drove Jesus to suffer for us – the two ideas are now inextricably intertwined.

And here, in the words we’ve just read, we get to the very heart of it all. This is real passion. This is what our faith is founded on. This is the infinitely loving act of a loving God upon which everything else depends. We aren’t to try and work ourselves up into a lather of passion for Jesus in the hope that it might do us some good in the long run. We read this story and find ourselves swept away by the passion Jesus has for us and – if we truly grasp what’s going on – find that we can have no other response to it than a deep, deep love for Jesus himself.

We’ve just read the account in Matthew’s Gospel of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. And the words we read from *Isaiah* earlier on, which most people take to be a prophetic reference to Jesus, help to emphasise what’s going on. It’s not pleasant reading, is it? But the bottom line is that Jesus loves us so

much, his passion for us is so great, that he died for us. Jesus died an agonising and horrific death for us. This was a terrible way to die – the most sadistic and inhuman punishment the Romans could think of. As you know, a group of us from the church are performing the Crucifixion and Burial plays as part of this year's *Lichfield Mysteries* and it is very difficult to stage well because it's almost impossible to portray the act of crucifying someone without hurting them, even when you don't want to. Our director this year – who's very keen on us understanding everything that's behind the story – asked me to say a few words to the rest of the cast about the mechanics, if you like, of crucifying someone, so I did a bit of research and it really is awful. I won't go into the details this morning, but if you've seen Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ* you haven't even seen the half of it.

Jesus, in his human body, did not go through some painless ritual when he died on the cross. We have become so used to talking about it, to singing songs – often very sentimental ones – about it, reading the familiar gospel stories, that we have probably lost sight of the appalling cruelty and overwhelming pain involved. That's often the way in pictures of Jesus on the cross. The French writer Roland Barthes once said, "*What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself.*" We find the depiction of raw passion somehow not quite right. Most pictures of the crucifixion are probably similar to this one [Slide], with Jesus looking beatifully down from the cross, hardly a scratch on him – in fact, in many Old Masters he even seems to have a smile on his face. I always felt that such pictures didn't do justice to what Jesus went through – and then I came across this representation of Jesus on the cross by a Latin American artist [Slide] which for me captures what it must have been like far more powerfully.

Jesus died in inhuman agony, his body absolutely racked with pain, his mind delirious with the prospect of death. He hung there, nailed naked to a wooden cross, as thousands of others did before him and after him, trying in his humanity to cope with the excruciating pain and the deep humiliation of being totally exposed before a jeering crowd, unable to control his own body, covered in blood and gore, rendered totally helpless by the long nails that fixed him, spread-eagled, to those rough timbers. Not only was there the physical pain and the psychological humiliation, but perhaps even worse was the sense of total abandonment. Most of his followers had run off – those that remained were a bunch of weeping women and John. And he was convinced that his Father, too – the God whose plan it was to sacrifice Jesus for the sins of humanity – his Father had abandoned him. As Byron wrote:

*His love was passion's choice – as a tree
On fire by lightning, with ethereal flame
Kindled he was, and blasted.*

And in his broken, bleeding, battered human body the great cosmic battle between good and evil was being fought. He hadn't wanted to do this. In his prayers immediately before his arrest he had pleaded with God to find another way, but nevertheless submitted to his will. And now, for the three hours he

hung there, all the evil in the world was concentrated in his body. Then as the final cry of agony escaped his lips and he surrendered his spirit, the power of evil died with him. The victory was won. The hold which evil had over the lives of human beings was finally released, but at the cost of Jesus' life. And he did that for you.

But the people who were standing around – the scoffers, the sadists, the people who always turned up at public executions, as well as the members of the establishment whose jealousy and lies and misunderstanding had put him there – the people who called out to him, mocking his message, they all got it so horribly wrong. Their jibes and jeering showed that they had failed totally to grasp what was going on and what Jesus had been trying to tell them for the past three years.

“Come down from the cross if you’re the Son of God!” they called. But that’s why he was there. It had to be the Son of God who died, because no-one else could have taken on the forces of evil and won as he did. No-one else had the power. No-one else was the innocent victim whose sacrifice could atone for the sins of humanity. As the hymn puts it: *“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.”*. As the Son of God he was the one person who could not get down from the cross. Had he done so he would have been no more than a cheap illusionist and the problem of evil could never have been resolved.

“He saved others, but he can’t save himself!” they shouted. It was precisely through refusing to save himself that he was able to save others. If Jesus had saved himself, the battle would not have been completed, the tension between good and evil would have remained in our world, with no hope of ever being sorted. We could not have been saved from having to bear the consequences of our own wrong choices, wrong decisions, wrong attitudes. Our eternal future would have been without any hope and we would have felt the promised punishment of God as he dealt with the sin inherent in each of us. In giving up his own life, he saved ours.

“Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him,” was their response. What would that have achieved? He might have enjoyed a brief and fleeting fame as someone who managed to get off a cross – a first Derren Brown or David Blaine, an illusionist who was out for cheap celebrity, a few “oohs” and “aahs” from the little knot of bystanders. And what would they have believed in? An illusion. If Jesus had somehow managed to climb down people would have been preoccupied with how he did it, what sleight of hand he used, where his accomplices were. He would have achieved nothing. Our salvation would not have been secured. The power of evil would have remained untamed. There would have been nothing to believe in.

No. This was a death that Jesus had to see right through. And as he hung there, it was so that you and I could be liberated from the power of evil in our lives, so that we could have a real choice as to how we would behave, so that we could escape the awful consequences of living lives that went against what God had planned for us. Jesus hung there because of a passion for you.

Jesus died on the cross to enable us to live – truly to live: fulfilled lives now and a life that goes on in God's awesome presence for eternity. Jesus took on himself our punishment, the consequences of our sin. Jesus battled with and defeated the power of evil. Take a bit of time as Good Friday and Easter approach to read through the gospel accounts of Jesus' death and try to see them as if for the first time; try to imagine what it must have been like. And then tell yourself that he was doing that for you, because he loves you so much, because he has such a deep passion for you.

You see, we need to recognise that, to accept his love and the way out that he provides. And if we do that, if we grasp just what an amazing passion Jesus has for us, then we must surely live in thankful response to him, live with a real passion for him.

Let's ponder that now as we listen to a familiar hymn.

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The bottom line is that Jesus loves us so much, his passion for us is so great, that he died for us. Jesus died an agonising and horrific death for us. This was a terrible way to die – the most sadistic and inhuman punishment the Romans could think of. Jesus, in his human body, did not go through some painless ritual when he died on the cross. He died in inhuman agony, his body absolutely racked with pain, his mind delirious with the prospect of death. Not only was there the physical pain and the psychological humiliation, but perhaps even worse was the sense of total abandonment. Most of his followers had run off and he was convinced that his Father had abandoned him.

And in his human body the great cosmic battle between good and evil was being fought. Then as the final cry of agony escaped his lips and he surrendered his spirit, the power of evil died with him. The victory was won. The hold which evil had over the lives of human beings was finally released, but at the cost of Jesus' life.

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Questions for discussion

1. What does the word "passion" mean to you? Give some examples, if you can.
2. Why do you think we are so reluctant to see the real suffering that Jesus went through?
3. Did God really abandon Jesus? Why/why not?
4. Why didn't Jesus use his power to come down from the cross?

5. How will you reflect on Jesus' passion this Eastertide?