

“GOD’S PASSION FOR YOU”

1 John 4:9-11

Over the past few weeks we’ve been looking a bit at our church’s mission statement, or vision, refocussing what it is that we believe we are here to do. Using *Isaiah 54 – 56*, we’ve been thinking about being *A Place of Welcome* and *A House of Prayer*, and a couple of weeks ago looked at what it might mean to “*Maintain justice and do what is right.*” It’s been about the Kingdom of God and what we need to do to begin to show signs of that, glimpses of the Kingdom, in our daily lives. And last week Marius Danovici from Romania talked about reaching out to the people around us, the poor and disadvantaged materially and also those who do not know Jesus. He spoke of the things we cannot do in church, but we need to go out into the community to do them. All in all, we’ve had plenty to help us think about what we feel we ought to be doing for God.

Those of you who are – or have been – ministers in the church (and there’s quite a few in this congregation) may have had the experience of someone saying something to you, possibly as an aside or off the cuff, that has had a profound effect on what you do or how you preach or whatever. When I was in London I would often preach about the kind of things we’ve been talking about here recently – what we need to do to make real the things we believe, faith in action, all that kind of thing. One morning someone said to me on the way out of church, “*You’re great at showing us **how** we are supposed to be living as Christians*” (my chest began to swell with pride), “*but you never tell us **why.***” And someone said something not too dissimilar to me a couple of weeks ago here. Why do we need to do all this? What’s at the root of it all? Where does our motivation come from?

Here! [The communion table.] Here is where it comes from. This is why we should be doing what we’re doing. This is the motivation for it all. This is why we go out from the church to help others, why we want to show love to those who may have missed out on it, why we want to connect with people who have felt the rough edge of life and who are struggling to cope. This is why we come here week by week to recharge our spiritual batteries, as it were. Here, in this bread and this wine is what we believe. Here, wrapped in the bread and swirling in the wine – just as the very essence of God was wrapped in human flesh with human blood flowing through it – here is the heart of our faith. This is the reminder to us of the passionate love of God for us. You and I are the objects of God’s passion.

For most people today, the word “*passion*” means a deep love for something or someone. It’s a love bordering on obsession that is given expression in often wild demonstrations of attachment or loyalty. Some of you may have got sucked into the commercial exploitation of that last Tuesday as you shelled out for overpriced roses or trawled the supermarkets for men’s grooming products as a way of

demonstrating your passion for your Valentine. Some people have a passion for another person, some have a passion for football or chocolate or the early novels of Jane Austen or collecting bus numbers.

Our English word “*passion*” actually comes from a Latin word meaning “*to suffer*”. There's also a link with our word “*patience*” as well. So we're talking about bearing something difficult, coping with pain, having something inflicted on you.

The way that a link has developed between that idea and a great love of something is therefore fairly clear. Anyone who has been in love will recognise the symptoms of pain and suffering that love can produce, especially if that love is unrequited or rejected. Great poets, novelists, playwrights, librettists down through the centuries have made the passion of unrequited love the centrepieces of their works – whether it's the great Greek myths of Andromache and her ilk, or more recent explorations of the phenomenon, such as *Bridget Jones' Diary*. Even Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, the story of his passion for Arsenal, is a tale of unrequited and unfulfilled love. Everyone has their own tale to tell, I'm sure.

And that's why this word “*passion*” is such a wonderful word to describe God's love for us, demonstrated in Jesus Christ. God's love for us is passionate in every sense of this word, as we'll see in a moment. We, as God's people, as those who have committed ourselves in some measure to follow the way of Jesus Christ, are thus called to be **Passionate People**, people whose love, whose central desire is to give everything for him, to reach out to those around with the passionate love of God. John brings it all to a focus in these few succinct sentences in his first letter. We read a part of that a few moments ago, and in *1 John 4:9-11* there is a wonderful summary of what this Passion of Christ is all about. Let's have a look at it.

1. **THE PROOF OF GOD'S LOVE** (v9)

There's a classic song by the rock group Foreigner – one of those great stadium anthems – with the title “*I wanna know what love is*”. What is love? How can we really show it? Is it really just the triteness of Tina Turner's “*second hand emotion*”? Is it the universal dynamic of Petrarch's or Shakespeare's sonnets? Is it the great *agape* of Paul's *1 Corinthians 13* passage? Well, God didn't go to great lengths to describe it to us – after all, it would almost certainly have lost something in translation along the way – he **showed** us. There's none of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's rather sterile (and soppy), “*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.*” God said, “What's love? How do I love you? Look at this: I'll **show** you.”

“This is how God showed his love amongst us,” writes John: *“he sent his one and only Son into the world.”* God **did** something. He expressed his love. He demonstrated it. He proved it. Love without expression becomes an obsession, something that is increasingly internalised and starts to twist and pervert the mind. And what God did was to send his only Son into the world to live amongst us. It was his love gift to us, his way of saying “I love you this much!” Notice that John writes here of *“his one and only Son”* – he doesn't call him Jesus or the Christ or any other name or title. He stresses the intimate link between God and his gift of love.

Jesus, God's one and only Son, the heir of heaven and co-creator, co-ruler of the universe, threw off the glory and majesty and power and awesome splendour of heaven to come and live on this little planet just like any other human being. Jesus came into our world. He wrapped his infinite majesty in a parcel of human skin and blood and bones. He experienced the emotions and yearnings, the sufferings and setbacks, the hopes and heartbreaks of human existence. He was vulnerable to all the things that affect and afflict us – from sorrow at the death of a friend to the pressure of temptation that was almost too much to bear to the joy of eating with others to the desperate, desperate struggle to fulfil his Father's will. He taught and healed and encouraged and rebuked. He lived and suffered and bled and died.

And all the time he was doing that, he could have been sitting at his Father's side in heaven. And all the time his Father sat there alone, his heart was heavy with the burdens that his Son was carrying. That was the proof of God's love – that he was prepared to **do** something: something so outrageous, so wild, so desperate, so real. And he did it for you. That was ...

2. THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE (v10a)

God's love for you was so powerful that he didn't wait for you to do anything about it – he couldn't wait, because there wasn't really any chance that you could, even if you'd wanted to. I don't know about your experience of love – or what you've seen of it on TV or in films – but you can get to a point in your love for someone that you've just got to tell them. You can't keep waiting for them to pick up the vibes, to guess what's going on in your mind – or heart. Maybe you just get to the point where you blurt it out, or you do something crazy and demonstrative like buying a ring and going down in one knee in a very public place or getting a message onto the radio (as used to happen on Capital Radio). You just want to give the object of your passion an opportunity to know what's going on and to respond in some way (positively, you hope!).

Well, God did that. It was nothing to do with our love for him. In fact, there didn't seem to be any earthly chance that human beings would ever reach out to God in love. History seemed to be a long litany of rebellion and disobedience and rejection and ignorance. Human beings – the objects of God's affection – were just too sinful to approach him anyway. This is how Paul expresses it in *Romans 5:8* – the one verse in the Bible that everyone ought to know by heart – “*God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

God's love for you was so powerful that he had to make a move. You matter to him so much that he was compelled to do something. Although he could not guarantee a response – after all, he'd given you free choice as a part of your essential humanity – he had to reach out, to give expression to his love for you. It was a totally unselfish love, a love that would have been delighted with a response, but he was going to do it anyway, whatever happened. John Powell once wrote “*Love rejects the question ‘What am I getting out of this?’*” God simply wanted the best for you and he was prepared to offer it to you even if there was a risk of it being thrown back in his face. That is a powerful love.

3. THE PASSION OF GOD'S LOVE (v10b)

And that's where we get to the real passion of God's love. He demonstrated his love by sending his one and only Son into this world, but once he was here that Son became a sacrifice: he suffered and died. Why did that have to happen? Why did God's powerful love need to find expression in this way? Well, John tells us here that it was an “*atoning sacrifice*”. The older versions of the Bible use the word “*propitiation*” if you want to keep everything beginning with P this morning. That probably doesn't make it any clearer for you, does it?

Remember that verse from *Romans 5*? Paul said that God loved us “*while we were still sinners.*” It's not a terribly popular concept these days, but sin is the root cause of all this. When God created us with free will and the ability to choose, unfortunately we chose not to do everything as he wanted, but by that time God had already said what would happen if we did make what he considered to be the wrong choice. There would be punishment – and it would not be very nice.

Of course, once human beings had started down the path of rebellion and disobedience, there was no alternative for God – who had to keep his word – but to apply the sanctions. At this point, many people say that this just goes to show what an unjust and tyrannical figure God really is. That seems a bit harsh, because it shows just the opposite – God is very just: he warned us of the consequences and then kept to his word. But on top of all that, he wanted to provide some way of escape for us. So powerful was his

love that he was desperate to help us find a way back to him, a way back from the inevitable consequences of disobedience to him.

That way was to send his own, sinless Son into our world to act as a sacrifice, to deflect God's wrath away from us and point the way out of the punishment that awaited us. Anyone who was prepared to put their faith in that sacrificial activity of Jesus could then escape the eternal consequences of their sin and renew the relationship that God really wanted to have with them. They could be made “**at one**” with God again through the “**at-one-ing**” sacrifice that Jesus made. There's further evidence of God's amazing love. Jesus himself put it like this when he was saying farewell to his disciples before he went off to make that sacrifice: “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. [...] Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*” (John 15:9a,13).

And it was some sacrifice. Not only has Jesus given up all those things in heaven which we talked about earlier; not only has he had to cope with the pain and vulnerability of the human condition; but, even as a human, he has to go beyond what most people ever have to cope with. He went through the emotional and psychological suffering of the hours before his execution. He was humiliated in a way that few human beings have ever had to face. His death was possibly the most painful and undignified that men have ever devised – spread-eagled naked and nailed to a wooden cross, his sinews ripping under the weight of his own body, his lungs stretched to bursting in such an unnatural position, his heart literally bursting under the pressure of it all, and all of that under the mocking gaze of his detractors as his friends deserted him and his own Father, his own God abandoned him to the weight of the world's sin. “*It is this act of God,*” writes F F Bruce, “*that gives meaning to his love.*”

Is that passionate enough for you? Can you ignore that love? Can you explain it away? Can you hear Jesus, between the gasps and coughs, asking his Father to forgive those who had nailed him there and who shouted obscenities at him there, and not say with the Roman officer at the foot of the cross, “*Truly this was the Son of God*”? Can you imagine the pain on the face of Christ, can you hear his groans and his awful, rasping breaths, and just walk away from it? Can you find any other way of escaping from the consequences of your sin? That is why it's called The Passion. And that is why we are called to be passionate people.

4. **THE PEOPLE OF GOD'S LOVE** (v11)

You see, if that is what God has done for us, we ought to reflect it in our own lives. F F Bruce, again, writes, “*The love which the New Testament enjoins involves a consuming passion for the well-being of*

others, and this love has its wellspring in God.” The way of Jesus is a way of love, a way of love in action, a way of **living and acting**. And it’s not just something we pluck out of the air – it’s a reflection, a replication of the love of God. That’s how John begins this little section: *“Dear friends, let us love one another for love comes from God.”* Jesus make that very clear to his disciples in *John 13:34,35*.

Look what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. How are you going to respond? You need to love other people, to be a little replica of Christ here on earth. And together, all those little replicas become the body of Christ, God incarnated once again in his creation. Of course, we are not able to make an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world – Jesus has already done that to the satisfaction of his Father, and if we could do it there wouldn't have been any point in the first place, anyway. But we are to live lives of sacrificial love, to live lives of passion – passion for God and passion for our fellow men and women.

And, as with God, there is no point being passionate about other people if we don't prove it somehow, if we don't put it into practice. That love needs to be shown amongst ourselves in our church situation. It needs to be given expression in the way we respond to our neighbours, our colleagues, to strangers and foreigners, refugees and asylum seekers, criminals and enemies. Jesus wasn't picky about who he died for. If he had been I wouldn't be here today and nor, I suspect, would you.

God has done something very, very special for you. He has shown you that he has a passion for you. How are you going to respond? You matter to him enough for him to have sent his one and only Son into the world as an atoning sacrifice for your sins. How much does he matter to you? And how much does what he says here through these words of John matter to you? As we take this bread and wine again this morning, thank God from the bottom of your heart that he loves you. Bask in his love. Receive his grace. Enjoy that renewed relationship with him that can bring joy and peace to even the most troubled soul. And pray that he will help you to be as passionate for God as he is for you!

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Questions for discussion

- 1) What images are conjured up for you by the word "passion"?
- 2) Why did God need to prove his love to us?
- 3) In what ways have you personally experienced God's love?
- 4) Would you describe your response to God as "love"? Why/why not?
- 5) In what way was the death of Jesus "*an atonement sacrifice*"? How would you explain what happened on the cross to someone who has no knowledge of Christianity or of the Bible?
- 6) How can we encourage each other to be "passionate people" for God?