

A DIFFERENT KIND OF PASSION

Matthew 15: 29-38; Matthew 21: 12-13, 23: 13-15

What do you think of when you hear the word 'passion'? Usually, passion is something we feel intensely and something we desire intensely. We are passionate about our families, our children and grandchildren. We are passionate about a particular sport or particular music. We are passionate about a particular place we've traveled to or want to travel to. We are passionate about a person, a lover, a friend. Passion is something so important in life. Imagine life without passion for anything. A person without passion is a person who is depressed, lost, without soul. As the great philosopher Plato would say, passion is to the soul what food and drink are to the body. Without passion, can we find real purpose in living?

And yet, passion is not necessarily a good thing. Passion can be a bad thing, a destructive thing. Passion can destroy the person who has it and others who become the focus of it. Passion has a dark side. The ancient word for passion is *Eros*. The word erotic comes from *Eros*. People get passionate about power, money and sex and it can become a destructive thing. People get obsessed and consumed by such passions and other people get used, abused and run over. People can get obsessed by gratifying every personal desire blind to how others are affected by it. Think about the trial of Jion Ghomeshi for example, or so many leaders in sports, the arts, business, education or the church accused of sexually abusing minors. Think about Bernie Madoff or Wall Street executives who contributed to the great economic crash of 2008 leaving many in financial ruin. Think about what politicians do to get into power and to hold on to power. Passion can become perverse, abusive and destructive whether it's about sex, money, power, and other things besides.

And so, from ancient times, while people recognized how essential passion is to living life with purpose and joy, they also recognized that it needed to be controlled and channelled. In one ancient writing called the *Phaedrus*, the philosopher Plato uses the image of a chariot rider with horses. Unless the horses are controlled and directed by a rider with a clear and positive mind, the chariot and its rider will be destroyed.

So, what are you passionate about? Is it a good passion, a healthy passion, for yourself and for those around you? Or, is your passion something that's all about you to the neglect and even detriment of those around you? Looking at the big ads all around us, passion is so often focussed on us, what we want, what we think we need in order to be happy and fulfilled. Do we really know what we need? Is what we want really what we need? Or, are we stuck with superficial wants that can never satisfy however much we acquire them? Can we ever get

enough money if that's what we're most passionate about? How about power or prestige or our 15 minutes of fame? Will that ever satisfy and fulfill in a deep way down to our soul? How about winning the competition, the sporting event, being lauded the best in this or that endeavour? Will that fulfill us in a lasting way? How about those around us – our family, our friends, our lovers? Can they fulfill us if we're empty inside and hoping their passion for us and our passion for them can fill our inner void?

These are big questions. But that's why we come here, to church. We come to ponder big questions and then to see whether something from our scriptures, our prayerful worship and our fellowship can open up doors toward answers in our lives. Let's see.

The focus of our readings is all about Jesus. Jesus is a man full of passion. But what is he passionate about? Does it fulfill his deepest human desires? Jesus is surrounded by people. Many of them are poor. Many of them are wounded by life? Many of them are living a dead-end existence with little hope of improving their lives or overcoming the circumstances that have pushed them down. They've come to Jesus hoping to receive something, something they're missing. What is it?

1) If we read the story of the feeding of the crowds in a surface way, we'll miss the deeper meaning. Sure, people are hungry and it's awesome they are fed. But how does this happen? Is it just a miracle from the sky? No. People are fed because people are challenged to share. Those who have something come forward and contribute, and those who have nothing receive something. But what needs to happen for people to share and for the hungry to be fed? Think about hunger in our world today and the kind of miracle needed to overcome it. What is needed is not just something material but something spiritual, something of the soul. Remember what Plato said? Passion is to the soul what food and drink are to the body.

But what kind of passion is needed to create this apparent miracle? Is it about power or money or fame or sex or something self-focussed like that? No. When Jesus sees the crowd, he calls together his disciples. He wants to teach them about a different kind of passion. He tells them this: "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." The word for compassion in the original Greek language in which the gospels are written is: '*esplachnisthe*.' *Esplachnisthe* is not just about your soul. *Esplachnisthe* is a physical term. *Splachna* are your insides, your intestines, your guts. Think about times in your life where you are deeply affected by something terrible and sad, or something overwhelmingly spectacular. You get butterflies in your stomach. Adrenaline rushes through your body. Your heart pumps faster and harder. You feel things intensely body, mind and spirit. This is what happens to Jesus.

He is totally seized body, mind and spirit with love for these people. This is his passion. It's the passion of compassion. Jesus is so passionate, in fact, that he shakes the disciples out of their spiritual lethargy. He challenges them to wake up to a deeper passion. If they are awakened to care and if they believe they can make a difference they can do something. Jesus' compassion shakes them up and they get mobilized. They work the crowd and the crowd gets mobilized. The miracle is that this massive crowd of demoralized people gets activated. Jesus awakens a sense of care in them for each other. The passion of compassion spreads like fire. Those who have something come forward and offer it up. The miracle is that everyone is fed. What kind of passion would it take to feed our world? Compassion! That's what it would take to feed our world, a lot of compassion.

What the gospel is telling us is that if we are to follow Jesus, we are called to experience his kind of passion as the most important, profound and fulfilling kind of passion we can ever experience in life. All other passions may gratify us in the moment. We may feel on top of the world and in total bliss when we have power, wealth, fame, sexual attraction and sexual gratification. We may feel on top of the world being loved and admired by those around us. But unless we are seized by the passion of compassion, we will never experience the fullness of spirit we were made to experience as human beings.

2) But there is also another side to this passion we call compassion. Our second set of readings reveal it to us. Jesus is upset. He's angry. In fact, he's fuming. How many of us have ever gotten really angry? I'm sure we all have. But what do we do with that anger? Where does it come from? For the ancient Greeks, the word they used for passion was not just *Eros*. They also spoke of what they call: *Thymos*. *Thymos* is an energy. You know, like the pictures of athletes in a moment of victory where they yell and have that intense look on their faces. *Thymos* is being spirited and alive and energized.

But this kind of passion also has a dark side. *Thymos* can also become anger and rage. *Thymos* is like a horse hard to tame. Understandably, such energy can also become destructive. Think about the violence in our world. Think about how anger combined with racism and hate leads to terrible actions in our world. Think about what we say and do to others when we are angry with them, offended or humiliated by them.

Jesus is angry too, but the passion of his anger goes in another direction completely. Those he is denouncing as hypocrites and those he attacks in the temple, are religious and political authorities in Israel. Jesus is accusing them of abusing their power over the people and being the cause of their destitution and ruin. Jesus isn't angry because they are denouncing him and trying to undermine him. Jesus is angry because he cares about what they are doing to their people. It's the other side of the same passion called compassion. You have to really care about people to get really angry when they are used and abused. Jesus reveals that there is a place for anger when it comes out of compassion for others. Jesus doesn't act hatefully or violently with

those he is attacking with words and actions. He disrupts what they're doing, shouts at them and publicly denounces and shames them.

It's hard to control and direct the passion behind anger. But Jesus never resorts to revenge or retaliation. He preaches against that. And Jesus never retaliates out of anger because someone is attacking him or taking advantage of him personally. He gets really angry when his passion is compassion. Whether it's feeling for others and even weeping over them when they're suffering, or whether it's anger and outrage when they are being taken advantage of and abused, it's the same passion of compassion that drives Jesus.

And all of this, brings it right back to us here today. All of us have passion in us. All of us care about ourselves and the people close to us. All of us have particular things we are passionate about. The question for us here in church, though, is whether we have cultivated the passion called compassion. Have we developed this passion and made it a focus in our lives somehow? The challenge of Jesus is that only compassion will make a positive difference in our world. Only when we are seized by compassion will we experience a unique, profound and enduring kind of fulfillment and peace within. How are we going to organize our lives and develop our priorities so that compassion is given its due in our lives?

We need inspiration. We need direction. We need God above us. We need God through Jesus embodying the way for us. We need God as Holy Spirit growing in us and flowing through us outward. We also need the support of others in spiritual community. May God find us wherever we are and take us where we have yet to go with our passion... Amen.