

Sunday of the Passion (*Palm Sunday*)

March 16, 2008

When you think of the word, “*passion*,” what thoughts come into your mind?

One of the key questions that employers today are often asking potential employees, who are interviewing for a job, is the question, “*What is your passion?*” “*What is it, that you do, that you are passionate about?*” In other words, what is it, that really gets you going, gets you fully engaged, and totally motivates you?

Another common understanding of the word, “*passion*” has to do with romantic love . . . the kind of passion that two young people have for each other, the kind of love that is so intense, that they can’t stand being away from each other for even a moment. They want to be with that other person constantly. In a passionate relationship, emotions and feelings are strong and intense.

And then there is the passionate communicator . . . someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose message was so passionately delivered that his dream became the dream of millions of people who heard him. As he repeated over and over again, “*I have a dream*,” his words carried over the hundreds of thousands of people who were with him in heart and spirit and felt his passion as he spoke.

When most of us think about “*passion*,” we think about intense emotion and intense feelings that are communicated to others or are motivational for ourselves.

But, when the Bible uses the word, “*passion*,” it means something quite different. Many of you have seen the Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. That use of that word in the title, portrays the Biblical meaning of “*passion*,” Passion comes from a Latin word “*passio*” or “*passum*.” Biblically speaking, “*passion*” means “*to suffer*” . . . “*to endure suffering and pain*.”

- Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, but Palm Sunday is also the first day of Passion Week . . . the first day of Holy Week . . . the week to remember the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. So today, we heard the story of the Passion, read in dramatic fashion. It is the narrative of the Passion of the Christ.
- Today we recall not only the shouts of “Hosanna” as Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem for the final time, but also the impending passion and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ that will follow.

Is suffering inevitable? Is it simply a part of life or does suffering have a purpose, as it did for Jesus? Ultimately, what does Jesus’ suffering have to do with my suffering?

The first words from Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Traveled* are these, “*Life is difficult! This is a great truth, but most of us can’t see it. Instead we moan, more or less incessantly, noisily, or subtly, about the enormity of our problem.*”

As if life is supposed to be easy for us, and therefore what has happened to us has never happened to anybody else before, at least not in this excruciatingly painful or insoluble way that it has burdened us."

Scott Peck says that he wrote the book, not because as a therapist, he hears his patients express this idea so often, but because he has been tempted to have the very same thoughts himself. He calls it the **Law of Exceptionalism** . . . the idea that what happened to me has never happened before, at least not to the degree that it has happened to me.

Life is difficult for everyone. There are no exceptions. As a young woman told her friend, *"Everyone has issues. So let's pass the tissues."*

If suffering is part of life and if suffering can have purpose . . . let's also recognize that the passion of Jesus had both political and religious overtones. The truth is that Jesus had to stand before both Caiphias and Pilate. He had to be tried by both the religious and the political leaders of his day.

Matthew describes the trial by Pilate as well as the trial before the Sanhedrin. And in both of the trials, Jesus refuses to answer the charges against Him. What is so amazing is that someone would actually stand before a political power or a religious power and say nothing in his defense! Can you imagine being lied about and letting the words stand without any opposition or opportunity to offer a rebuttal! And yet, that is exactly what Jesus did. In Pilate's case as he questioned the crowd for the 2nd time and hearing his own wife's fears based on a dream she has had, it does not move him enough to release this innocent man.

That's because, as a political leader, Pilate is afraid. He lacks vision. He sees only the immediate issue of a possible riot of the people and wants to take care of the presenting problem! Pilate is blind to the big picture, blind to the larger scope of things. Pilate's political leadership is questionable at best.

Unfortunately, we can certainly think of political leaders in our own day who tend to use slogans to describe the bases of their politics and are looking for quick fixes. Instead of teaching the people how to use reason and responsibility, combined with a sense of true compassion, they seek to create simplistic solutions to complex problems.

I think it is very interesting to understand that this is exactly what Jesus is up against as He faced both the religious leaders of Jerusalem, as well as the political leaders of Rome. And it serves as a sobering reminder and commentary on all human relationships, all human agendas and all politicized commentary!

You say that people are different today, but I'm here to say that people are still the same! In many ways, the public is extremely fickle. We are also very gullible. We often do not want to listen to the truth, even when it is staring us in the face! The religious trial of Jesus and the political trial of Jesus are striking examples of an inability to deal with the truth because of a whole set of misconceptions, fears and inconsistencies.

When we let rumors and half-truths dictate our decision-making, and if this also affects the decision-making of our leaders, we are the ones who ultimately suffer.

Here in the United States, we are in the midst of a politically-charged year, with a presidential election on the horizon. In speech after speech, promises are being made and simple slogans are being tossed around by candidates from both parties. Simple answers or sometimes “non-answers” are being bantered about, hoping to find votes and to entice voters to cast their support with them.

What has changed from 1 C. Jerusalem to our day? The players may be different. The location is different. The issues may be different. But so many things haven’t changed a bit . . . 2,000 years later! How can the public cheer for Jesus on Palm Sunday . . . “*Hosanna to the Son of David*” in one breath, and in a few days later cry, “*Crucify Him!*”

Instead of teaching us the virtues of using reason and responsibility, combined with a sense of true and genuine compassion, we are being led down the road of dealing with personal needs and wants. And too often, decisions are made on the basis of what is best for my political career. What is best for my political future? What is best for the party? And what is best for the country can easily be twisted and turned into what will benefit me!

Let me share a brief example on the political front. We know that there is great political emphasis today on the dire state of the economy here in this country. Are we in a recession or are we nearing one? Unfortunately, the issue of the economy, which is the one of the top concerns of most voters today among the pollsters . . . often panders to the desires and wants of people, rather than their needs.

Last week, there was a feature article in the *Chicago Tribune* about the plight of what was portrayed as an average American, and the impact of the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the escalating price of gas. The implication was that the husband was unable to meet the needs of his family – to keep food on the table - because of the mortgage crisis in our country.

As I read further in the article, I discovered some of the inconsistencies of the situation of this average American household.

- The husband was actually earning \$113,000 annual income, which sounds like a very good income, yet he was in a crisis.
- The article went on to say that the family was also living in a \$500,000 home, they owned a BMW that they were paying on,
- They had maxed out all of their credit cards, so that their debt load was staggering, and were now in a severe financial predicament.
- Assuming that the value of their home would naturally increase over time, they had over-extended their personal desires and wants were now hit hard by the sub-prime mortgage crisis.

So is this a national economic problem or is it a personal financial problem! Unfortunately, for the most part, for our politicians, the issue is usually couched in terms that families are trying desperately “*to keep food on the table.*” In reality, the issue that is described as the overall state of the nation’s economy is more realistically descriptive of maintaining a lifestyle that may no longer be affordable.

But the slogan used in the political discourse is that people are just “*trying to keep food on the table for the family.*” The reality is more accurately reflective of those who are living an overextended lifestyle that is simply not affordable, no matter what the economy is!

The politicians are addressing the issue of an economic crisis, derived from escalating costs that are beginning to impact the relentless desire on the part of people to want more and more things, more and more money, and more and more of the good life. This is in stark contrast to those third world families who don’t earn \$113,000 a year and may be fortunate to have 1/10th of that and really are trying to keep food on their table! There has always been a difference between needs and wants, yet today’s political landscape makes everything much more undifferentiated.

This simple example points out that the whole passion story of Jesus, is a story that has both political and religious implications. Jesus had to stand before the politicians as well as religious leaders. But the Passion story is also a story of us!

In the last supper with his disciples, the words of Jesus, unique to Matthew, are filled with meaning: “*My appointed time draws near. (26:18)* The Greek word is “*kairos,*” which means “the decisive moment of history” when an old world would die and a new age would be born. For Matthew the death and resurrection of Jesus are, in fact, the turning point in all of human history. For Matthew the religious and the political are intertwined and connected.

As we hear of the betrayal of Judas, we are also reminded that actions have consequences. The fact that God loves us does not eliminate our responsibility. Throughout his gospel Matthew reminds us that we are accountable to God for our choices and our actions. Judas is a case in point. But Peter has his problems too. The disciple, whom Jesus had blessed as their leader and sustained upon the chaotic sea, would find his loyalty to Jesus break when he is confronted with intense suffering and fear. In the last supper, which is an important part of the Passion story . . .

- The bread broken is Jesus’ body given for them;
- The cup poured out is his blood, the blood of the covenant, is God's forgiveness and love to all.
- All of Jesus' ministry . . . every word of liberating truth, every healing touch, every confrontation with injustice . . . comes together in the bread and the cup, in the body and blood of Jesus given totally for the sake of the world.

This and so much more is the very essence of Passion Story that we re-live this Holy Week.

- It is Jesus' story, but it is also our story.
- It is an old story, but it is also a contemporary story.
- It is a story of faith and lack of faith.
- It is also a story of politics at their best and their worst.
- In the end, it is the story of the liberating power of love and justice, which always defeats force and power.

It is Jesus' story but it is also "our story." Join me and hear it anew this Holy Week!