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As Jesus was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

Luke 19:37-38

Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify Him!' Luke 23:20-21

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As you know by this time in our worship service, today is Palm Sunday our Church calendar. Many will decorate church building with Palms, as we celebrate Christ's 'triumphal procession' into Jerusalem. But today is also Passion Sunday. This is the beginning of Holy Week, and today we hear the Passion story to prepare us for the events of the week ahead. But when you hear the word 'passion' what do you think of?

When it comes to 'passion' many today think of young love; where emotions were young, strong and intense. We may speak of our 'passions', that is, those 'things' we are 'passionate about' (for example, some sport, or hobby, or life together as family, or even work). At other times we may think of 'passionate people. The word 'passion' may evoke thoughts of passionate speakers or passionate leaders who continually push or promote some cause (not always good: remember, Adolf Hitler was a passionate man).

If you were to name and describe someone you would describe to be a 'passionate person', who would it be and on what basis? Who is someone you would say stands by their convictions, and actively (and with their whole being) seeks to live by their beliefs?

When we use the 'passion' in relation to Jesus Christ this is not only what is meant. Certainly Jesus was a 'passionate man' who strongly believed in what He did. But the word 'passion' comes from the Latin "passio" or "passum" and it means to suffer, to endure suffering and pain. This is the first day of Passion Week, the week of suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today is Passion Sunday, and so we hear the Passion story of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is true 'passion'.

For many people who know so well the story of Jesus' life, Palm Sunday always seems a little surreal. On that Palm Sunday the crowds shout as Jesus entered Jerusalem, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Praise God." Yet only five days later (on what we now call 'Good Friday') this same crowd starts to chant softly, but crescendoing in power to say: "Crucify Him. Crucify Him."

This great change in the crowd's heart seems unusual. Have you ever stopped to try to consider why this great shift in sentiment in the crowd towards Jesus?

This change occurs because we always want Palm Sunday and not Passion Sunday. Most people prefer a pat on the back and someone saying 'Good on ya' mate' to the quiet, unthanked, and sometimes-costly serving. It is our human nature to choose comfort over sacrifice. It is our human nature to choose praise over humility. It is our human nature to seek to do what is 'popular', even though with proper thought we see that what's being done really isn't right on the clear basis of God's Word. It is our human nature to complain about things when we believe we don't get our own way. That's what the crowd did when it came to Jesus. Their hope was that Jesus would be an earthly, political king to lead them in a fight against the Romans (hence their strange charge about not paying taxes – if only Jesus had led us to stop this, they thought). But in their minds Jesus had let them down by not being that 'glorious king'.

There were always all sorts of revolutionary 'kings' appearing before and after Jesus' death. Periodically in Israel's history in the time of the Romans, some person would rise up against the Romans. In 66 AD a man named Menahem claimed to be the Jewish king and entered Jerusalem with a small army. He was defeated. A few years later a man named Simon, who had been a military hero, gathered a sizeable army about him, who claimed him as their king. Their entrance into Jerusalem led to the Roman siege of the city, which destroyed the temple and most of the city. Simon was taken to Rome and executed.

That was why Jesus was crucified with the sign 'King of the Jews' above Him. The easiest way to 'convict' Him (whether the claim was true or false – although it turns out to be more true than anyone there present could contemplate) was to call Jesus 'The King of the Jews'. In Jewish eyes, then, He was seen as trying to take the place of God. In Romans eyes, also, He was seen as trying to take the place of Caesar in people's minds and hearts. Therefore, someone accused of such great crimes of blasphemy and treason should be executed.

At this point we could say Jesus was a great, strong, powerful and 'passionate person' because He was willing to die for His cause. But we need to listen carefully again to what Jesus' 'passion' is really all about.

Luke fills the crucifixion scene with important details not recorded in the other Gospels. Luke records that Jesus is crucified with the two criminals surrounding him, fulfilling Jesus' own prediction at the supper table: "For I tell you that the Scripture must be fulfilled in me, namely, 'He was counted among the wicked'" (23:37). Here already is a pointer to the true nature of the passion of the Christ. Jesus loves all people, including 'sinners' (which, properly speaking, is all people!).

Luke also records that as Jesus had repeatedly taught his disciples not to respond to violence with more violence and to be forgiving, so Jesus forgives the very men who drive the stakes into His body. Here also is a pointer to the true nature of the 'passion' of the Christ. Jesus grants forgiveness to all people, including 'sinners' (which, properly speaking, is all people!).

Later, as Jesus' life slipped from Him on the cross a thief asked Him, "Remember me." It was a common prayer, a request that darkness would not overcome him. Obviously, the thief believed that Jesus could answer the prayer, and Jesus responded, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." Here again is another important pointer to the true nature of the 'passion' of the Christ. Jesus works eternal life for all people, and it is a gift which those who have faith see and grasp.

What does it mean to be a passionate person? Who is someone you believe to be passionate about some thing?

Today in our Gospel we hear of the true nature of the passion of the Christ. Jesus gives forgiveness to those who persecute and kill Him. Jesus gives life for those who deserve death. Jesus gives us the promise of a new day in the face of the darkness of this world.

The sign above Jesus' head declared: "This one is the King of the Jews." Jesus is the King. But Jesus does not use His royal power to overthrow governments. Instead He forgives sinners. He doesn't blame those who turned against Him and unjustly killed Him. He forgives them.

In our lives we are called also to be 'passionate people'. But the 'passion' we are to have is not to come from our human emotions, or trying to whip ourselves into a spiritual frenzy in order to feel like God really loves us, or trying to do a certain quota of 'spiritual works' so we feel like God really loves us and will reward us. Instead, it is simply to focus on the cross of Jesus.

As a Christian I can think of nothing more important than this to be passionate about: the forgiveness Jesus brings, and the life He gives that lasts forever.

The repentant thief prayed to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

In the course of this week it would be good for you to take out your Bible (and with your children, a children's Bible) and to read, and re-read, the story of the Passion of the Christ.

In your own personal devotions take out your Bible and read the story of Jesus' Passion from each of the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Listen to Jesus' passion for you.

Remember also that whenever you gather in a place like this and the pastor says, "Your sins are forgiven," this is really Jesus speaking to you through Him. Remember that when the words are spoken, "This is My Body. This is My Blood," that this is same Jesus who died on the cross present to grant you (and strengthen you in) the gift of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Here is Christ, present in this place, passionate for you. Rejoice in His holy and eternal love, now and always. Amen.