

## A Passionate Faith

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Sermon prepared for **15 March 2009** (Lent III).

John 2:13-22; Ex 20:1-17; Ps 19:7-14; 1 Cor 1:22-25

Theme: *"Christ's example is of passionate faith, willing to take risks"*

**Scene 1.** Our Gospel reading today confronts us with a Jesus that we do not usually see. Usually, we preach a Jesus who is loving, gentle, inclusive, forgiving, accommodating, sensitive. This is the Jesus we find easy to preach about. But today, we have a Jesus who is angry, violent. He comes into the Temple in Jerusalem and makes a whip. Note what John says – it is not that Jesus found some cord and used it as a whip. Rather Jesus finds some cord and *makes* it into a whip. This suggests that he took some time to create a weapon of violence. He then chases out of the temple all who were selling cattle, sheep and goats, as well as the animals. Jesus loses it!

Imagine, if Father Alan decided he was fed up with people coming late to church. Some people drift in late. Alan jumps up and chases them out of the church, shouting: "Get out! Get out! How dare you come in late! Have you no respect for God? No respect for his Church? Get out! Come back next week if you are really committed!" I think we would call the two churchwardens aside and tell them to go have a word with our priest who has lost it.

Yet this is exactly what Jesus does! Why? Why does the son of God, love incarnate, behave with such rage and violence?

Jesus is outraged at corruption. There is corruption among those he chased out. And worse still, corruption in the house of God! These people were selling animals for people to buy to offer as sacrifices in the temple. People who came from far away, like Jesus who had come from Cana via Capernaum, could not bring their own animals with them. They had to buy them in Jerusalem. And these people who sold the animals had a monopoly. They were exploiting people who were poor, taking advantage of people's faith to make money for themselves. They had taken something spiritual and sacred, the animal sacrifices in the temple, and corrupted it, polluted it with their own greed.

And Jesus was angry! He was passionate. He was zealous. He was not prepared to tolerate this. So he stood up for what is good, spoke out for what is true and put his foot down for what is just.<sup>1</sup> The disciples were reminded of a verse from the Psalms, "Zeal for your house will consume me." Jesus was zealous, passionate. And in his passion, he was willing to stand up and speak out.

God is looking for the same from us. God is looking for Christians to be passionate. God doesn't want us to be armchair Christians, criticising the TV news. God desires us to be passionate, zealous. Willing to stand up for what is good, willing to speak out for what is true, willing to put foot down for what is just. In Revelation 3, which John also wrote, he relates a prophecy from God to the Laodicean church: "You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth!" Let us not be tepid, lukewarm. Let us be either scalding hot, or freezing cold. Let us, like Christ, be passionate about the things that God is passionate about. Let us be passionate about those things that are good and true and just.

**Scene 2.** But what is good and true and just? What do we take a stand for? What do we speak out about? When do we put our foot down? Some things are obviously right or wrong. But most things are grey. It is often not clear what is the right thing. What is the right thing to say about the situation in Zimbabwe? What should we do about Robert Mugabe? What should we

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<sup>1</sup> I raised my hand on "stood up", moved it to the right on "spoke out" and dropped it in a fist on "foot down". Did this several of the times I used this pattern to create a visual image that people would remember.

be saying about our upcoming elections? What is the Christian message at this time in our country's history? These things are not clear-cut.

Where can we go to find out what is good and true and right? Perhaps we can go to the Law, to the Ten Commandments, which we read this morning. These commands were given by God himself, on Mount Sinai, to Moses to take to the people of Israel. They are God's vision for a just and humane society. They are good – they are from God himself. Surely we can find the answers there? Our Psalm today speaks loftily of the virtues of the Law. God's Law is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, sure, precious and sweet. It revised, it makes us wise, it gives us joy and light, it both warns us and rewards us. The Law is good and true and just.

But, following the Law can lead to calcification. We become rigid. We begin to obsess about the Law to such an extent that we fixate on the letter of the Law and forget the intention of the one who wrote it. This was a big problem for the people of Israel. And Jesus was often critical of it. For example, in Matthew 5, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'Do not murder'. But I say to you, if anyone hates his brother, he has already committed murder in his heart."<sup>2</sup> Do you see what Jesus is saying here? He says that God intention with this command is less that you should not be a murder, and more that you should not be *murderous*. When we fixate on the specific law, we understand it to mean simply that we should not shoot someone to death, when in fact God's intent is that we should not be hateful towards each other.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. To bring it to fullness, to wholeness, to fruition. In a real way, Jesus is himself the fulfilment of the law! The Law is embodied in him. Jesus tells us that the Law can be summarised as love – passionate love for God and passionate love for others. And this kind of passionate love is what Jesus lived out fully in his life.

So, if we want to know what is good and true and just, we look at Jesus. It is in the person of Jesus, that we can see what is good. In our relationship with him, we know what is true. In the life that he lived, we see what is just. Jesus is the embodiment of everything that is important to God.

If Jesus were here today, in 2009, I think he would be concerned about things like the number of people who have been displaced from their homes and are seeking refuge in South Africa – aliens in our house. He would be concerned for good governance and the King Report in business, and the Batho Pele White Paper for those in the public service – because these things are good and true and just. He would ask why the Anglican Church is splitting over the ordination of gay priests. Let us rather split over whether we should respond to poverty or over the abuses of human rights, than over something as trivial as what a priest's sexual orientation is. These are things I believe Jesus would want us to be passionate about today. These are the things that are good and true and just. This is what he would want us to stand up for, to speak out about, to put our foot down for!

Let me tell you a little story of something that happened at my work recently. My boss' boss made a decision that I couldn't agree to. I believed it to be unethical and immoral, and illegal in terms of labour law. It would disadvantage some of our junior staff and would have negative consequences for our students. I was very unhappy with his decision and unsure what to do, if anything. Some of my colleagues egged me on and so I wrote a letter to him. Needless to say, he was not happy with my letter – I had called him out and confronted an unjust and bad decision he had made and he didn't like that. The relationship between him and our Department was jeopardized. He threatened disciplinary action. It was a scary time for me, and I really questioned whether I had done the right thing to speak out.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I realised that I had dozens and dozens of stories that I could tell about times when I did not stand up, did not speak out, did not put my foot down. I realised how often I am not passionate in my faith. How often I let bad, untrue and unjust things continue unchallenged. Thank God I had this story to tell you, else I'd really have been in trouble with this sermon!

<sup>2</sup> A rather loose translation (!), combining Mat 5:21-22 with the pattern of Mat 5:27-28.

**Scene 3.** The truth is, that standing up for what is good is risky. When we speak out for truth, we can get hurt. When we put our foot down for what is just, people may suffer as a result. It is not a safe thing today.

Jesus knew this. He knew that there were risks involved. His cleansing of the temple led directly to his crucifixion. Look behind you, at the wall behind you [there is a crucifix on the back wall of the church] – that was the result of Jesus' passion. That was the result of his decision to stand up and speak out and put his foot down. This is why John places this incident near the beginning of his narrative, while the others place it near the end. John wants us to see that Jesus' willingness to be passionate, to take risks, would lead ultimately to his death.

And Jesus knew this. That's why, when the Jews demand a sign to prove his authority, he tells them to destroy the temple and that in three days he will raise it again. They thought he meant the temple temple, but of course, he meant his own body – the centre of God's presence in the world. He knew that his choice to stand up for goodness, truth and justice would lead to suffering, to the cross.

This is foolishness! It is foolish to choose to follow a path that we know will lead to suffering and risk. Surely it would make much more sense to take a safe path, look after my own interests, let other people look after their own interests? Sure it would be safer. But it would deny the path that Jesus has set before us. We would not be Christians who are passionate about the things that God is passionate about. That's why Paul says that preaching Christ crucified is foolishness in the eyes of the world, but wisdom in the eyes of God.

**Finale.** During this time of Lent, we have the opportunity to reflect on the path that Jesus walked. Not only on his destination – the cross. But also on the path that leads to the cross. Jesus has set an example for us to follow. We walk in the footsteps that he has already laid out for us. We walk with him, not alone. God is looking for us to be passionate, as Christ was. God is looking for us to stand up for what is good, to speak out for what is true, to put our foot down for what is just, like Jesus did. This requires courage. This is not easy.

So as we journey through Lent, let us reflect on what God is calling each of us to. Let us reflect on what is good and true and just. And as we come towards the Eucharist this morning, let us recognise that Jesus' passion for us, his love for humanity, led eventually to his death, a death we celebrate.

Amen.