

Transfiguration 19th February 2012 - Robert Innes

Last Sunday our smaller children arrived in church after their Sunday School groups carrying cards with red hearts on them. Some of the more enterprising children had stuck the red hearts on their forehead, which was cute. The hearts represented the love of God and the love celebrated on Tuesday, which was Valentine's Day. Reminded by the children of the importance of Valentine's Day, I went down into town later in the week and bought Helen some chocolates from Pierre Marcolini – expensive but delicious. They were in fact, red hearts, just like those worn by the children: heart shaped, I suppose for love, and red, I suppose for passion. Because Valentine's Day is all about passionate love.

But thinking about it during the week, it occurred to me that 'passion' is one of those words whose meaning has altered. Today, passion mainly connotes desire, drive and achievement. The North East of England where I come from has taken to marketing itself, I notice, as "passionate people, passionate places." The slogan is meant to imply a forward thinking, dynamic place in which to invest. A region of coal tips and unemployment no longer! Deutsche bank markets itself with the strap-line "A passion to perform". "We make a difference", they say, "It's the way we do business." Passion harnesses emotion with reason to get active results.

Interestingly, that's just the opposite of what the word mainly used to mean. My English dictionary tells me that the word passion means first of all "the fact or condition of being *affected or acted upon* by an external agency." The English word passion comes from the Greek word *pascho* meaning "to suffer or to endure". And Jesus passion was that part of his life when he ceased to be an actor, but was instead *acted upon* by others. In this older meaning, passion is about being passive.

Today is the Sunday before Lent, and our gospel reading concerns the Transfiguration of Jesus. This is a key turning point in Mark's gospel. It occurs after Jesus has concluded his Galilean ministry. Jesus has just for the first time explained to his disciples that his destiny is to suffer and to die, though they haven't really understood what he meant. Now, before setting his face towards Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there, he enjoys one last and dramatic moment of intimacy with the Father. The scene takes place on top of a high mountain, traditionally the strikingly shaped Mount Tabor. Jesus takes with him his three closest disciples, and is transfigured before them. His clothes become a dazzling white, a heavenly cloud descends and the voice of God the Father is heard.

In this striking scene, Jesus is entirely passive. He says and does nothing. One commentator notes that Jesus isn't just transfigured he is also transfixed. It is evidently in some mysterious way a kind of foretelling of the events of the passion. Perhaps Jesus being exalted on a high mountain looks forward to his lifting up on the cross. Certainly the disciples are forbidden from talking about the experience until after the resurrection – the implication being that it's only after Jesus has died and risen that they will understand what this awesome experience on Mount Tabor really meant.

There's also a backward reference to Jesus baptism. The words spoken by the Father are the same: "This is my Son, whom I love."

At these three key moments, his baptism at the hands of John, at the time he is transfigured or transfigured, and at his crucifixion, Jesus is passive: he waits upon the actions of others, he receives what is given or said or done to him.

Now most of Mark's gospel is written in fast-moving, punchy prose. Jesus is typically the subject of active verbs. Jesus teaches, he preaches, he heals, he drives out demons, he calls disciples, he forgives sins. He is always on the move, doing new things, taking initiatives. Jesus is the strong subject of the action. But this changes in a quite striking way, after Jesus is handed over by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane. After this point, Jesus takes no initiatives: instead he is acted upon by others. Instead of being the strong subject he is the *object* of the action. So we read that he is led from one place to another, he is condemned, he is silent, he is blindfolded, he is flogged, he is crucified.

It is striking that it is precisely in these moments when Jesus is passive, when he receives baptism from John, in the transfiguration when his glory shines through, and above all in his passion and crucifixion: it is at these times that Jesus divine identity is most fully disclosed and made known. "Truly this was the Son of God", says the centurion, as Jesus hangs passively on the cross.

Is this significant and does it matter? Yes, I think it matters quite a lot. Because we live in a world which prizes activity and action. We work long hours. We fill our children's lives with a round of activity. We urge our old folk to "stay active". It doesn't entirely matter whether this activity is productive or not – 'keeping busy' is felt to be important for its own sake. By contrast, passivity, inactivity and waiting are things of which people are fearful and try to avoid.

And yet all of us have to be passive some of the time, and some of us have to be passive and waiting for much of the time. Related to the ideas of passivity and passion is the category of 'the patient'. Any of us could become a patient very quickly. Step out in front of a car, fall off a bicycle, suffer a stroke and you or I would quickly turn from being an active, independent person to being a patient, dependent on the care of others. But this transition from action to passivity is made by many other people in less obvious and more gradual ways. We have within our church those who have become new parents and have to wait upon the demands of small babies, there are those who have lost their jobs - members of "the daytime club", those who find themselves retired earlier than they might have intended, those dependent on regular medical intervention, those confined to their homes through ill health or great age. Each of these situations involves a degree of waiting upon others and a reduced level of action and activity. And in each of these situations it is very possible to feel less valuable and less valued than you once were. In fact the loss to one's sense of self-esteem can be painful to the point of being crippling. On the BBC news on Wednesday they interviewed a young man who was unable to find work – one of the millions of young people in Europe who can't get work. The man was hardly able to speak, his eyes filled with tears and he said: "I just feel humiliated".

It is well worth reflecting on the reasons for the personal and social distress that situations of passivity and waiting cause us. It could all be a matter of economics and the Protestant Work Ethic. There have been and still are cultures where the highest

status is accorded to those who don't need to work but can enjoy leisure. But we have come to believe that only those who are productive members of the work force are making a real contribution. So the greatest prestige goes to those who can claim to be the busiest and who work the longest hours. Economic reasons are certainly important.

But there could also be deep religious reasons for our valuing of action over passion. In his wonderful book, *The Stature of Waiting*, W.H. Vanstone draws attention to our Western religious inheritance. We have been taught about a God who is most godlike when he is active and creative. This God just acts on the world: he speaks, he creates, he builds up or he destroys – but this God is never the object of anyone's actions. And if we believe, as for centuries people have done, that we are made in the image of this God, then we have true dignity when we are doing what he does: being active, proactive, creative, initiating, achieving. In which case, to move to the role of the patient - to be inactive, to be passive, to be waiting around, is to fall from our proper stature and dignity.

That is why it is vital to be reminded that the climax of Jesus life is reached not in his work but in his passion. It is when he is handed over to others, and acted upon by men, that his glory is made known, a glory foreshadowed in the account of the transfiguration we have read today – when Jesus clothes become a shining white, the white clothes of a martyr. Indeed you could say that one of the most significant theological insights of the twentieth century was the realisation that God did not just act, he could also be acted upon, in Jesus God waits upon the action of others: God isn't just pure activity, he also suffers the actions of others. And that is precisely in these experiences of passivity or passion that the Son of God most demonstrates his godliness.

So we remind ourselves that waiting upon others isn't an abnormal state of affairs. It isn't something to be necessarily feared and avoided. Waiting is, at least, part of natural human endeavour: Scientists waiting for the results of experiments, naturalists waiting in a hide for the sight of rare birds, artists waiting to see what will result from their brush strokes. And waiting upon others is a necessary part of caring. The nurse who waits upon the needs of patient is much more helpful than the nurse who busies themselves filling in paperwork. Prayer is really just waiting upon God. And it is in waiting that we invest the world with possibility and power of meaning. So waiting cannot be a degraded human condition. It ought not to be a state of diminished human dignity. We may be creators with God, but we also wait with God. And the person who waits, who is passive, is not diminished but is invested with enormous dignity: he or she stands beside God.

As I draw to a close, we return to where we began with the red chocolate hearts, hearts for love and red for passion. And I want to plead for the older, original meaning of passion – passion not as desire and achievement but as endurance and suffering. Because true love, as any serious lover knows, requires just that. Love is not mainly about desire – we could use another word, for that, for example, lust.

To love someone truly is to open ourselves to them. It is to wait upon them, to be dependent on what they give us. That's why Valentine's day is risky: will our offer of love be returned or will it be spurned? In love we wait for acceptance or rejection.

And to be passionate, in a strict biblical sense, means having the strength to bear with another and to suffer what they may give or do to us. That is what Jesus does in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus: he offers himself and is willing to receive and to bear his people's violent rejection.

In our day, people yearn for passionate love – for a love which waits upon the recipient's needs. We, most of us, are tired of being made a part of other people's projects. We want to be given space, to be listened to and to be loved. And so those who wait upon others are hugely valuable. And in our waiting just as much as in our activity we can be true disciples of Jesus. Because this kind of passionate love was the thing that above all characterised Jesus. That's why his clothes turned a dazzling white at the mount of transfiguration. And why we recall today that Jesus's divine identity was most fully revealed not in his activity but in those moments when he waited upon the actions of others.