

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

“Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang; through pillared court and temple the lovely anthem rang. To Jesus who had blessed them, close folded to His breast, the children sang their praises, the simplest and the best. (LSB 443, st. 1) Those words from one of the most popular Palm Sunday hymns ring out with a joy and excitement that makes this day something special. It is said that everyone loves a parade. Maybe that is why we like the whole image of Palm Sunday, and the joy and excitement that comes with the waving palm branches and the shouts of “Hosanna to the King of Kings!” I imagine that we could see ourselves joining in that praise, singing our glad hosannas to Him who comes in the name of the Lord.

But in the midst of the songs of praise, we are also mindful that Palm Sunday is the first day of the week we know as Holy Week. That brings to my mind another song, one that seems totally out of place in this season. I think of the words of the Christmas carol: *I wonder as I wander, out under the sky; how Jesus our Saviour was born for to die; for poor ornery people like you and like I; I wonder, as I wander, out under the sky.* It is an overwhelming contrast, when we stop to think about it; that the Saviour who came into Jerusalem amid the shouts of praise and celebration; the very Lord of All, who alone is worthy of all praise and honour from all people; will soon be suffering the greatest torment of body and soul, as He pours out His lifeblood on the cross, to redeem all people.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus says: *“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I have come to this hour.* (John 12:27 - ESV) The hour of which He speaks is described in detail in another tradition of this day, which is to read the story of our Lord's arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and burial from one of the Gospels. I would encourage you to take a few moments today to read Mark 14 and 15, to see once again the great love of our God, revealed in the suffering—in Greek, the *pathos*, or in Latin, the *passio*, the passion of our dear Saviour.

What do we think of when we think of passion? The dictionary says that passion is any intense, extreme, or overpowering emotion or feeling. More often than not, we tend to think of passion as something related to love or to romance. Women often say that they want their husbands to be more passionate. When a wife asks her husband, “do you love me?”, she wants to hear something to rival the passionate poetry of Keats, something like: “My love for you is higher than the highest mountain, or deeper than the deepest ocean. I love you with every fibre of my being; if I could not love you, my life would be empty and meaningless, and I would have no reason for living.” But what do they get? “Huh, oh yeah, I love you. Hey, if you're in the kitchen, could you make me a sandwich?”

Or we may think of having a real passion for sports or the arts. This kind of passion often shows itself as people are consumed by whatever their passion may be. (Why do you think they call it March Madness?) The person whose passion is music may study it intensely or practice endlessly. They are likely going to invest in the best stereo equipment, and buy just about every record and CD they can get their hands on. They tend to eat, sleep, and talk only about music. Biblically, there is only to be one place for that kind of passion: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* (Matthew 22:37 - ESV) And yet, people can become “passionate” about so many things.

While our ideas of passion today tend to focus on love, affection and ardour, the word passion actually comes from a word that means, “suffering”. That is why we speak of compassion, which literally means “to suffer together”, or sympathy, which refers to our feeling with, or being affected by, the suffering of someone else. But if you really want to know what passion is, look at the life of Christ, especially the events that we will remember this week. From His triumphal entry to the last supper in the upper room; from the upper room to garden of Gethsemane, where His soul is in anguish, because of the load of sin and shame that has been placed on His sinless shoulders; from the garden to His trial before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate and before Herod; that crown of thorns, the scourging, the slaps and spite of both Pilate's and Herod's guards; the mocking cries of the people who only days before had welcomed Him as king; and yes, the pain of the cross itself, where He gives His holy, sinless life as a sacrifice for all—these are part of Christ's passion, a passion unlike anything else the world has ever known.

Now remember why the eternal Son of God took upon Himself human flesh and blood! Remember why He rode into Jerusalem that day. Remember why He, who had all the hosts of heaven at His command, allows Himself to be treated so shamefully by mere mortal men. Remember why He is nailed to that cross and why He suffered and died that cruelest of deaths. It wasn't because of anything He had done. Pilate knew Jesus didn't deserve to die on the cross. He told the chief priest, leaders and the crowds, ***"I find no guilt in this man."*** (Luke 23:4 - ESV) We are told that when the centurion, who was in charge of the crucifixion, saw how Jesus died, ***he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"*** (Luke 23:47 - ESV) So why does the all-powerful, all holy Lord of heaven and earth condescend to endure all this suffering? He doesn't have to, you know. Jesus said: ***I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.*** (John 10:14-15, 18 - ESV)

What could move Jesus to endure all of this pain and sorrow, this terrible passion? Our text tells us why: ***For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*** He does all this for your sake. He does it because of His passionate love for you and me. God loves you. That is more than a cliché on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt. We are His passion, His greatest love. God loves us; He really, really loves us, with a passionate love the world cannot even begin to comprehend. His passion for us, His all consuming love for us, wants only the best for us. What makes this all the more amazing is the fact that we aren't worthy of that love. We don't like to admit it, and we often tend to deny it, but the truth is we are sinful people. We choose to go against our God. We willingly and deliberately break His rules and transgress against His commands. We continually do those things which are deserving of the most severe punishment, especially before the all-holy creator of all. And yet, God loves us. He must deal with sin, or hold us accountable for it. He cannot simply excuse our sins, because that would not be just. He cannot gloss over them, because that would not make us mindful of how hurtful and dangerous those sins really are. He also knows that we can never save ourselves. That is why Jesus endures the pain, sorrow and death of the cross. How blessed it is to hear the words of Scripture declare: ***but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** (Romans 5:8 - ESV) You matter to Him so much, that Jesus suffered all that He endured in His passion for your sake, that you might become rich in forgiveness and life through Him.

The reality of Christ's passionate love moves me to wonder, "where's our passion?" Since Christ did all this for us, should not His great love evident in us? Luther sums up his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed with a reminder of why Christ redeemed us. He did it ***so that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as He is raised from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.*** (SC, 2nd Article) That is where our passion should lie—not in the things of the world, but in the Saviour who died to free us, and who lives to be our life and light. Our passion should be to worship Him who set aside all that was His so that we can share in His glory. Our passion should be to serve Him who came to serve us and save us. Our passion should be to love the people whom our Lord loved with all His heart. Our passion should be evident as we ***proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*** (1 Peter 2:9 - ESV)

And remember what we think of as true passion. Passion is that ardour, that devotion and desire for something or someone. Oh, if only we had that passion *as* the people of God *for* the God of our salvation! If only we would show the same passion that our Lord has shown in His love for us! That passion would compel us to be in the Lord's house, to hear His Words of love and forgiveness and to do it with excitement and joy, not as if it is the hardest task of our week. That passion would bring us to feast on that blessed gift of salvation, as our Saviour feeds us with His body and blood. That passion would move us to give from the gifts that He has first given us, believing it is our privilege to support the work of His church. That passion would mean we wouldn't be begging for volunteers, but that people would eagerly seek the opportunity to use their gifts to His glory, whether those gifts are to build and fix, to sing and praise, or to teach and encourage. That passion would show itself to others, too. We don't have to go about forcing our faith on others, but we can be kind, compassionate and understanding to one another and to those around us. We can share a gentle witness of our faith. We can be courteous and considerate of others. We can look at our family and friends, and also at the strangers around us, and see those for whom Christ died. We can't do everything—but those little acts of kindness, and those simple words of witness, done out of love for the Lord, can do great things.

And of course, that passion would bring a wonderful spirit to our church family. Paul tells us: ***Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts***

to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17 - ESV) When Christ is our passion, then this is what we will see in His people, as they show that same passion for Him and for one another.

Oh, how passionate our Lord was, and is, for us and for our salvation. He continues to bless us with His forgiving grace. He continues to feed us and strengthen us. He stands with us in temptation, that we may overcome the devil's snares. He gives us the life we live in Him. We are the Lord's true passion. God, give us such hearts of faith that You are our passion, too! Amen.