



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – March 2008

### A Crime of Passion

**L**OVE IS STRONG as death, passion fierce as the grave' says the Song of Solomon (8:6). Most of the year we think of 'passion' as a word for anger, enthusiasm or love – passionate with rage, passionate about football, passionate about Jim or Gladys. But in Holy Week and Easter we use the word 'passion' differently, and remember that what it really means is 'suffering'. And extreme emotions do make us suffer.

The Passion of Christ, at the heart of Holy Week, can draw our attention to the sheer physical suffering of Jesus. Mel Gibson's film – and scenes on television from Spain and Latin America – remind us of the horrific torture and brutal death which the Lord suffered. He was the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy, 'despised and rejected...a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3) who 'gave his back to the smiters' and did not hide his face 'from shame and spitting' (Isaiah 50:6). The crucifix on the altar reminds us that the Lord's death which we proclaim at Mass (1 Cor. 11:26) was a real death, a painful death, and a slow death.

As words keep changing their meaning, we need to keep remembering – and reminding ourselves - that 'passion' means 'suffering'. And yet the other meanings of 'passion' – anger, enthusiasm and love – also come into play in Holy Week. God is angry about human sin. He is angry when men (usually male men) hurt and maim and destroy. God is enthusiastic about his children. He longs for us to be with him, to live our lives for him, and share his life with him. God loves the world he made. He loves the world so much that he gave us his only Son 'that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). God's Passion, like human passion, is described in the Bible as a cup overflowing with emotions of anger, enthusiasm and love.

Sometimes passion boils over with tragic results. Crimes of passion get lots of news coverage – murdering the husband of an unfaithful wife, for example. Something a bit like that story is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. God is the husband and Israel is the Bride, the Bible tells us. Yet it isn't Israel – the unfaithful Bride - which kills Jesus the Bridegroom but the Roman occupying power – the secular power with whom, burning with jealousy, the temple authorities have formed a liaison. The tragedy of many ages and many societies is when the religious establishment falls in line with the civil power and gets it to do its dirty business.

Jesus was a condemned criminal. His supposed crime? That too was a crime of passion. He loved us so much that he revealed himself to us as God himself: the ultimate crime of blasphemy, punishable by death. If he was pretending to be God, he deserved to die. If indeed he was the Son of God, as the Roman Centurion at the cross saw him to be, he showed his love for us by dying for us.

May God bless you at Passiontide. May you find the Way of the Cross to be the Way of Life and Peace.

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