

SYNOD CHARGE 2000.

PASSIONATE BELIEVERS

Philippians 2:5-11

Isaiah 45:23 ff

The theme for the year 2000 was chosen many months ago - "Passionate Believers."

How do you feel about that? Some of you may wonder about such a theme.

Why do I say that?

Well, first of all passion is no substitute for truth....is it? We are well aware of the fact that many movements and philosophies have passion and along with it a fundamentalist approach to just about everything, which can lead to factions, bigotry, persecution and even killing and you rightly say, "I want none of that."

Then passion is no substitute for love. Sometimes passion can repel and destroy rather than draw and bring life.

No! passion on its own, by itself, is not the answer.

But then again:

Belief in something without passion can be wimpish and even as dull as ditch water and very unattractive. It remains remote and hardly a driving force.

Nor must we think that passion is merely an emotion – a feeling something that consumes our hearts only – without engaging our minds.

Our passion must involve the intellect as well as the heart.

If we are to be passionate believers then, there must be over arching principles to keep us balanced and healthy.

Tomorrow morning in the continuation of this Synod Charge, you will hear from a number of people. I have invited several to share something of their passion for various areas of ministry that God has laid upon their hearts.

But if any one of those legitimate passions becomes all consuming, to the neglect of other things, then that Christian's or congregation's life becomes unhealthy.

The healthy circle of faith becomes unbalanced. It becomes elliptical and the faster it spins the more elliptical it becomes and often out of control until it destroys itself. *(I wonder if you should have an illustration here.... ie. A cartoon!!!!)*

Biblical faith is balanced always. It remains healthy because at the centre there is one over-riding passion. A passion for Jesus.

That is what keeps us healthy

As you hear others speak tomorrow morning about their passion, please remember that it is keeping Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Lord of the Church, and of life at the centre that develops healthy, balanced individuals and churches.

Remove Jesus – diminish him in any way – allow other legitimate areas to overshadow him, be it worship, plant, cell groups, social responsibility, finance, church growth, anything.....then we move into an unbalanced expression of the faith which harms and hinders and dishonours the living God.

(Do you need to add here that if you emphasise one doctrine more than another you also become unbalanced ie. We are called to declare the whole counsel of God!)

This evening I want to set the scene by talking about a passion for Jesus.

I want to give this passion for Jesus some Biblical undergirdings. I want us to understand a true passion for Jesus Christ is not merely having the emotions stirred, though perhaps for some it may include emotional stirrings because that's the way God made you.

But remember we are all unique and just as we are different in our physical appearance so we are different in our emotional make up. We are not the same and I praise God for that.

So please let me emphasise again that passion is not the same as emotion. We are not just talking about feelings though it includes them.

Any healthy passion for Jesus Christ must, as I have already said, have intellectual content. Don't be frightened of that word – God did not leave us

in the dark to grope around without hope - he has revealed himself supremely in his Son the Living Word and through the written revelation we call Scripture. Both will require of us to use our God given faculty, the mind. Both Christ and the Bible challenge us to think.

So, tonight in our synod service I want to set forth something of the Majesty, the Supremacy and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Such knowledge gives balance to all other aspects of passionate believing and will always keep the individual Christian and the church healthy. I believe this balanced biblical Christianity is the only way of reaching our diverse society with God's Good News.

Let me introduce what I want to say about this passion for Jesus by talking for a moment about the world we live in. For that's the context in which we must live out our passion.

You will agree with me that one of the unique marks of the society in which we live today is Pluralism And it's a challenge to the Christian Church.

Now, before you switch off, let me explain the word "pluralism" which may not be a word that you use in everyday conversation but you will recognise its meaning by observing the world around you.

Pluralism

Two hundred and fifty years ago, (*18th Century!!*) the leaders of the European Enlightenment had boundless self-confidence in the autonomy of the human mind. It did not need any revelation or any tradition because the human mind was capable by itself of discovering all truth through science.

Today, at the beginning of the 21st Century that intellectual triumphalism of the Age of Enlightenment has gone. "Post Modernity" is the word often used to describe our culture today. It is a funny word, as if one can move beyond being modern!!!!

Post modernity is a reaction against that enlightenment, - that unbounding confidence in the ability of the human mind. The only confidence of post modernity is that it lacks all confidence.

Let me unpack that for a moment. You will notice that, in today's world there is no such thing as universal or absolute truth.....

Modern men and women will say, "all we have is a plurality of subjective, culturally conditioned opinions," i.e. lots of different thoughts and ideas. Put simply, you have your truth and I have my truth, she has hers and he has his and they have theirs. We all have our own truth. In other words not one truth – but many truths – certainly not one absolute truth that any one person or movement could make. Such a claim is abhorrent to our society today.

Let me illustrate this. In Amsterdam I heard Dr. Ravi Zacharias speak. He had recently been speaking to a group of students at Cambridge University in the UK.

At the end of his lecture (I can't remember the topic) there was an open question and answer time. A doctoral student stood up and said, as many say today, that there was no absolute truth or standards of right and wrong.

Dr Zacharias responded to the student's statement, "If I was to put a baby on this table and hack it to bits with a meat cleaver, would you say that it was wrong?"

The student was silent for a moment, and then replied, "I might not like what you did but I could not say that it was wrong."

That is a bizarre and extreme example, but it illustrates postmodern thinking today. We all have our own truth And the name we give to that aspect of post modernism is "pluralism."

A plurality of opinions – each of which is true, there are no absolutes.

As G.K. Chesterton the writer says, "the tragedy of not believing in God is not that people believe in nothing but that they believe in anything." And I might add, everything.

I hope you don't mind me using these terms and explaining them. I think it's important because these terms are appearing more frequently in our newspapers, journals and magazines etc.

Now, remember that I'm trying to set the scene in which we have to live out our Christian faith and convictions as passionate believers. Pluralism is not just the acknowledgement that there are many different religions and ideologies, no! we need to understand that pluralism itself is an ideology – a system of belief if you like. It asserts that every religion has its own independent validity and it condemns, as sheer arrogance the attempt to convert or win anybody, let alone everybody to our particular opinion.

Do you recognise this in your friends, family members, companions, those you work with? We've all heard it, and some of us may well agree with it.

Pluralism rejects the Christian claim to uniqueness and dismisses the goal of reaching a community, a city, a nation, let alone a world for Jesus Christ as completely arrogant and as a totally unacceptable imperialistic idea.

I hope that our ears are close enough to the ground, and not stuck somewhere up in the clouds, for us to know that this is what many people outside the Christian Community think about the Church and about us as followers of Christ.

Let me give you an example of this kind of pluralism or post-modern thinking. I read an account of a social worker who was visiting a lonely student in his flat.

The social worker saw this pile of books on the young man's desk.

There was a copy of the Bible.

There was a copy of the Anglican Prayer Book.

There was a copy of the Koran.

There were three copies of the Watchtower, the Jehovah's Witness magazine. A biography of Karl Marx, a book of yoga exercises and what I think the guy really needed, a little paper back entitled, "How to stop worrying." This is the cultural mood in which we live, and we are surrounded by it all the time.

A passion that is merely emotional, that says, "shout louder, switch up the volume," that seeks to manipulate, is just not good enough. It will not work in the long run. It may find a small following among those who are seeking a feeling, but little else.

So how should we respond to the pluralism we find in society today and the communities in which we live? I want to suggest that we respond passionately but with great humility, for there is no room for superiority or triumphalism, or personal pride or conceit.

However we must continue to affirm that there is such a thing as truth - timeless, objective, universal truth. There is such a thing as truth, because God has been pleased to reveal himself, and what God reveals as truth is truth indeed. He has revealed this in many ways, not only in the ordered beauty of the created universe but supremely in Jesus Christ and the total Biblical witness to him.

So the existence of this truth – a truth that has been revealed and is accessible and universal – it is able to be found, to be discerned and it's for all.

This truth is essential for our identity as Christians and our witness to a world in need. The Church is a community of Truth. It is our responsibility: To defend the truth, to explain the truth and to communicate the truth. We are to be a community of truth.

But let's be very clear as to what we are claiming to be True? This is very important.

We do not claim the truth for "Christianity" as a system in any of its confusing and different forms; Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and so on. We are not claiming the truth of a system called Christianity and we are not claiming finality or uniqueness for the "Church" as an institution in any of its cultural manifestations; Western, African, Maori, Asian or South American. No! we are claiming uniqueness only for Jesus Christ; for a person, not a system, not an institution but a person. We believe that the Lord Jesus is unique and there is nobody like him in the world. It is

this passion for Jesus engaging both the mind and the heart that will keep us healthy and balanced.

Many of you will have heard the name Sadhu Sundar Singh. Sundar Singh came from an Indian Sikh family. In his early teens he was an angry young man and very aggressive against Christianity. "It is a religion of foreigners," he said. He even burned a Bible publicly, such was his hostility against the Christian faith. Three days later he was converted through a dream in which he saw the Lord Jesus Christ.

From then on he was determined to become a sadhu, a wandering travelling preacher, a holy man. He became very famous as he walked all over India and neighbouring countries.

The Sadhu once visited a Hindu College where an angry agnostic professor of Comparative Religions confronted him saying, "What particular thing have you found in Christianity that you did not have in Sikhism?" "The particular thing I have found," said the Sadhu, "Is Christ." "Oh I know!" snapped the professor, "but what particular principle or doctrine have you found?" "The particular doctrine and principle that I have found," said the Sadhu, "Is Christ,"

And we want to say that he is unique. We may talk about Alexander the Great, Napoleon the Great but not Jesus the Great. He is not "the Great". He is the Only! There is nobody like him. He has no peers, no successors, no competitors or rivals. He is absolutely unique.

Let me remind you that the Church's overriding passion is for Jesus, but its not just a feeling, this passion has real substance.

In our pluralistic society today - a society where anyone can claim anything - to say that Jesus is unique, may for many only raise the odd eyebrow or two or cause a yawn, because you can have your truth and I can have mine. But to insist on this uniqueness - that he is the only one - will raise anger in some quarters or at least a demand an explanation.

Can we defend this claim?

Wherein then lies the uniqueness of this One we are passionate about? Because some will say, "every person is unique, every blade of grass is unique, every flake of snow is unique, you are unique." So it is not really odd to claim that Jesus is unique. But his uniqueness was different.

I want to suggest that there are four areas in which we must passionately proclaim and defend the uniqueness of Christ. They are also reasons why we are so passionate about Him.

First: He is unique in his incarnation.

That is to say Jesus of Nazareth is the one and only God - human. The only person that has ever lived who is both fully divine and fully human at the same time. Nothing in any other of the world's religions or philosophies

can be compared to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ - God coming to earth in human form.

Its incarnation took place when Augustus was Emperor of Rome and can actually be pinpointed in history. Christianity is an historical faith. If it were not true that Jesus was an historical person who was born and lived and died and rose again, then Christianity is nothing more than a myth and its truth is exploded. The incarnation of God in Christ took place once and for all and forever. In Jesus, God assumed humanity never to lay it aside again.

It is a fantastic thing to remember even tonight as we gather here in this cathedral like this, that the God – man, Jesus Christ is glorified, enthroned at the right hand of God. He still wears the humanity that he assumed in the womb of his virgin mother and at his birth.

So that is the first reason why we are passionate about Jesus. The Incarnation – hold on to it. It is an essential part of the Faith.

It 's also an essential part of our reaching out to a world in dire need. The verse read tonight in John 17 "As the Father has sent me so send I you." And we need to ask, "How did the Father send Jesus?" By the incarnation.

And if we are sent into the world in the same way that God sent Jesus into the world, then all authentic mission is incarnational mission. We have to incarnate – enter into other people's worlds – their social world, their intellectual world, their emotional world. We have to incarnate in order to reach them for Jesus Christ.

Second: He is unique in his atonement

Not only in his birth, but also in his death.

God took the initiative to come after us in the person of Jesus Christ his Son. He not only took our human nature to himself at his birth. He also took our human sin and guilt our condemnation and judgement upon him in his death. Jesus not only lived our life on earth, he died our death. He took our place on the cross.

It is the most incredible and magnificent truth for us to hold on to, because it has happened in nobody else. In absolutely no other religious system is it claimed the God became a human being and then died in our place for our sins.

Bishop Stephen Neil, the great Anglican missiologist and theologian who died a decade ago, wrote many helpful books on mission. He said in the picture language of the New Testament, "The Good Shepherd goes out into the wilderness to seek the lost sheep. That is to say God in Christ takes the initiative in going out to seek and to save those who are lost with no grudging calculation of the cost to himself." He goes on to say, "if any other religion has anything like the doctrines of incarnation and atonement I have yet to find it."

There is nothing like these two things.
 God in Christ did this for me
 He did it for the world
 How do I feel about that?
 Am I passionate about these amazing central truths or is it ho...hum? Give
 me tongues and healings any day?

Kagawa, the great Japanese Christian, he too saw in the cross the uniqueness of Jesus. He wrote this; "I am grateful for Shinto, for Buddhism for Confucianism in the sense that there are lessons that I learned from these three faiths. But these three faiths utterly failed to minister to my hearts deepest needs. I was a pilgrim journeying upon a long road that had no turning. I was weary and I was footsore. I wandered through a dark and dismal world where tragedies were thick. Buddhism teaches great compassion, but, since the beginning of time who has declared, "this is my blood which was shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

In the blood shedding of Jesus, to establish the new relationship between God and us, Kagawa found the uniqueness of the Gospel.

So here are two ways in which He is unique.
 In his incarnation – his birth and
 In his atonement – his death.
 Two stupendous events that should drive us to our knees in humility and at the same time eliciting from us shouts of praise in gratitude for all that He has done. Could I be passionate about Him.

Thirdly: in his resurrection.

Now let's be clear as to what the resurrection was. The resurrection is not a claim that the personality of Jesus somehow survived death. Nor is it that his influence continues in the world today or that he merely lives on in our hearts.

That is not resurrection.

No, the resurrection is an affirmation that his body was raised from the tomb and simultaneously changed into an altogether new vehicle for his personality. So the resurrection body of Jesus was the first bit of the old material universe to be redeemed, renovated, transformed. It is the pledge that the rest of the physical universe is going to be redeemed one day, impossible though that may seem to some.

He is our resurrected Lord, in spite of what some so called theologians and church leaders might say from pulpits or in books. The resurrection was the major visible evidence of the supreme power of God. We cannot cope with death, but God has coped with death and conquered it by raising Jesus from the dead.

He's our resurrected Lord and it's in the power of His resurrection that we desire to live every day.

So what have we seen thus far? We have seen that in no person other than Jesus has God first become a human being, through his virgin birth and then borne our sin through his death and then triumphed over death, through his resurrection. Jesus of Nazareth is uniquely competent to be our Saviour, and the Saviour of the World because nobody else possesses these qualifications but Him.

Let's go on to the fourth reason. Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection and **Fourth: He is unique in His Sovereignty.**

He was not only raised from the dead, but he was promoted to the right hand of God, the place of supreme power, authority, glory and executive influence. So his sovereign rule at the right hand of the Father is another uniqueness.

But you knew all that didn't you. It's all there, not only in Scripture but also in the Liturgies, the services of our church if we stop to listen and read.

Let me spend a little time on this because it demands a response from us. "Jesus is Lord." We all know this simple phrase don't we? It was the first, the earliest and the simplest of all Christian creeds. Those who made this profession in the early days were baptised and welcomed into the Christian Community. Listen to the Apostle Paul's words, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus *is Lord* and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved." And on another occasion the Apostle went on to say, "Nobody can say *Jesus is Lord*' except by the Holy Spirit."

Now it may seem extraordinary that two words in the Greek language of the New Testament, *Kurios Jesus*, Lord Jesus or Jesus Lord, could possibly be a satisfactory basis on which to identify somebody as a Christian. Have you ever wondered about that? "Surely," you might say, "it's hopelessly inadequate as a creed. That's reducing it to the lowest denominator at its worst." Well, as a matter of fact it isn't, because, although the formula consists of only two words "Kurios Jesus" it has enormous implications.

A THEOLOGICAL CONVICTION.

I want to suggest to you this: That to say "Jesus is Lord"Expresses on the one hand a theological conviction about the identity of Jesus and on the other hand a radical personal commitment to Him which has implications for us if we claim to be followers of Jesus.

To begin with then, yes it is a theological conviction, a conviction of belief. When you say "Jesus is Lord" what are you affirming theologically about him? You are affirming that he is God Paul points out three things in our reading from Phillippians and the rest of the New Testament is in full agreement.

1. He gives Jesus a God title.

First, he gives Jesus a God title, "The Lord."

The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek, around 200 BC by Jewish Scholars in Alexandria, Egypt. The scholars didn't know what to do about the name YAHWEH or Jehovah (as it's rendered in the older

translations.) They felt unable to translate it, transliterate it or even to pronounce it – so sacred was the name.

So what did they do? Whenever they came across YAHWEH in the Hebrew of the Old Testament they put “Ho Kurios,” “The Lord”. It comes 6,156. Now, Paul and the early Christians knew that very well. They knew the significance of the title.

‘Ho Kurios’, that it was a divine title for the Living God yet they did not hesitate to apply it to Jesus. 700 times in the New Testament Jesus is called ‘Ho Kurios, “The Lord.’ That is tantamount to saying that Jesus is YAHWEH – that Jesus is God. Paul gave Jesus a God title.

2. He gives Jesus a God text.

Paul transferred to Jesus a God text. Our New Testament reading from Philippians chapter two is a very clear echo of Isaiah 45:23. God is talking to himself and He says, “I, by myself, I have sworn, that every knee must bow to me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to my name.” This verse in Isaiah obviously applies to YAHWEH but with tremendous audacity Paul re-applies the title to Jesus. It’s a God text that applies to YAHWEH alone in the Old Testament but it is reapplied to Jesus in the New.

It is God’s desire that every knee shall bow to Jesus and that every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So that’s the second thing, the Apostle transfers to Jesus a God text.

3. He demands for Jesus, God worship.

To bow the knee in calling him Lord is to worship him but to worship Jesus is idolatry if he is not God.

Now these three things are incontrovertible. That Paul gave Jesus a God title. That he transferred to Jesus a God text and that he demanded for Jesus God worship. They are clearly and undeniably there in the New Testament, the historic documents of the Christian faith.

So we can see from the earliest days Jesus was recognised, acclaimed and worshipped as none other than God.

That is the first implication of saying, “Jesus is Lord.” It expresses a theological conviction that Jesus was and is the Son of the Living God and worthy of our worship. Indeed Revelation chapter 5 tells us that the redeemed Church will spend eternity worshipping Jesus.

A Radical Commitment.

The second implication of saying, “Jesus is Lord.” Is that it expresses a radical personal commitment. The Lordship of Christ means that he is the central pivotal point around whom our life revolves. Every aspect of our lives come under his dominion. Our hopes, our relationships, careers, finances, homes our ministries, everything.

But let me move on; to say that “Jesus is Lord” also has a global implication. To confess “Jesus is Lord” is to affirm His reign over my life, it is to affirm His universal reign. This is something that I am passionate about. It is to believe that God has exalted Jesus to the highest place of honour and glory in the universe, beyond every other rank or dignity. Everything has been put under his feet. Jesus has this global authority, glory and honour. It’s sensational! So it’s God’s will that every knee shall bow to Jesus and every tongue confess Him Lord and nobody has the authority to place any restriction or limitation on that word “every”. “Every” means “every.” It means every human knee, every Muslim knee, every secular knee, every Buddhist knee and every Jewish knee. It is God’s desire that every knee, without any exception whatsoever.

And we need to remind some Church leaders of this, that it is God’s will that every knee should bow to Jesus, and if it’s God’s will, it must be our will and the will of all the people of God.

This is the greatest of all missionary motivations. This is the greatest motivation for reaching out in love to our communities, our families, friends, our neighbours – to all.

Compassion is not the greatest motivation as one might expect. I think it’s the second but not the greatest.

I don’t believe obedience to the great commandment is the primary motivation for mission as many say it is. Mind you the great Commission in Matthew 28 is important and obedience to it is very important.

But do we think that plain obedience - doing something because we have to or are under obligation to do – is the highest motivation in Christian life for Christian mission? It isn’t. It’s not obedience. It’s not love and compassion for the lost, important as those things may be, it’s jealousy for the honour and glory of Jesus.

Now some people are offended that the word jealousy is applied to God and to Jesus. What is jealousy? Jealousy is a resentment of rival. There are two kinds of jealousy as there are two kinds of anger in Scripture. There is righteous anger and unrighteous anger and there is righteous jealousy and there is unrighteous jealousy.

If somebody comes to your community and threatens to outshine you in sporting prowess in academic ability, in preaching or leading worship or in administrative ability and you feel jealousy towards that person rising within you - that’s sinful - because you and I have no right to have a monopoly of athletic or academic, or preaching brilliance. If somebody comes along and outshines us they have a perfect right to be there. *(In fact we should be able to say, hallelujah, praise the Lord)*

But supposing you are married. Supposing you had stood, with your spouse, side by side, and the minister had said, “Do you take this man, this woman,

and forsaking all others,” and you said, “I will.” Then if a third person intrudes into the marriage – you would be right to be jealous because that person has no business to be there.

Now it is in that sense that our God is a jealous God. He says, “I am YAHWEH and I will not give my glory to another,” “I will not share my glory.” He claims a monopoly because He’s God and there is no other.

So if God is jealous of his own name, then the people of God should be jealous for it too. We find that with the great bible characters, Elijah – “I have been very jealous for the “Lord of Hosts”” and rightly so because the people of Israel were giving their homage to the pagan God Baal instead of to the Living God.

If Elijah said it in the Old Testament, Paul said it in the New. Listen to him in second Corinthians, “I feel a divine jealousy over you, I betrothed you to Christ as a bride to her one husband and I fear that you are being led astray by the devil.” He was jealous over people of God.

Now, I wonder if we as individual leaders and as a church have ever experienced that. This jealousy for the honour and the glory of God. We should do. It’s the great motivation for mission.

Can we have a passion involving heart and mind for Jesus Christ? A passion beyond the mood swings and vacillations of our emotions. Can we be gripped with a passion for Jesus Christ and the honour of God’s name?

Conclusion

Let me sum up and conclude. When we have a passion for Jesus we will see that: mission is not an impertinent interference in other people’s private lives, Christian mission is not a dispensable option that we can ignore if we don’t happen to like it. Mission is not the hobby of a few eccentric enthusiasts Let alone fanatics. Christian mission – world mission is an unavoidable deduction from the universal Lordship of Jesus. God has uniquely honoured him, promoting him to his right hand and we long to see him honoured as well.

You’ve all heard of the great missionary, Henry Martin. He was a Cambridge graduate in maths. He was ordained and became curate to the famous Charles Simeon. He believed that God had called him to mission work and he was prepared to leave his girlfriend and a promising academic career. In answer to the call of God he went out to India and then to Iran (Persia).

A brilliant scholar and a brilliant linguist, he learned the three languages of the Islamic World, Arabic, Urdu and Farsee. On one occasion he was in Iran, to present a newly completed translation of the Bible to the Shah of Persia, somebody insulted Jesus in his presence. A war was raging between Christian White Russians and the Muslim forces and the Muslim forces were winning – and somebody in his hearing said that Jesus was kneeling before Mohammed and begging for mercy and giving homage to Mohammed. Henry Martin said these words, “I was cut to the soul by this blasphemy.”

When he was asked why, he replied, “I could not endure existence if Jesus were not glorified – it would be hell to me if he were to be always thus dishonoured.”

When I first heard that some years ago now, I remember being deeply ashamed of myself because I don't think I'd ever experienced that jealousy for the honour and glory of Jesus.

We need a passion for Jesus that brings about such a holy jealousy. Not a fanatic bigotry but a loving passion. There's a difference!

When we are setting forth the uniqueness and the supremacy and the majesty of Jesus Christ, let's pray that the stirrings of divine jealousy within us will make us long for Jesus to receive the honour and the glory which are due to His name, which He deserves because of who He is and what he has done.

As Synod begins

Let us desire and pray for a passion for Jesus Christ, that is not just a vague emotion but a passion that is an intelligent response involving both the heart and the mind to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and all he has accomplished for us.

Ending

Fall in love with Jesus and his world again. This will promote passion. How are we faring? Do I still feel about him as I did? Are fires burning low?