

How does the passion of Jesus Christ save us?

By Fr. Dave Heney

Why is the Passion of Jesus Christ the central event of our salvation and from what are we saved? How does this horrible event change us now, more than 2000 years later? The events of Holy Week reveal our deepest understanding of Jesus. So much of our faith finds its meaning from the events of those remarkable days in Jerusalem. How can the peace and fulfillment we seek in so many different places be found in this passion of Jesus?

Jesus and the Last Supper

Jesus revealed on Holy Thursday what he would do on Good Friday. He gathered His disciples to celebrate the annual Passover Meal and like all good Jews they would recall the courage of Moses, the stubbornness of Pharaoh, and the dramatic Exodus from Egypt. They ate the same kind of unleavened bread their ancestors ate the night the Angel “passed over” Israelite homes in Egypt. They would recall how “blood of the Lamb” placed on front doors saved their ancestors from death. The memories and emotions of three years with Jesus are brought to focus at one meal. It must have been quite a night.

The escape from Egypt formed them into a tightly-knit people bonded by a shared memory of rescue and salvation. Holy Thursday night was a new experience of unity for a “new chosen people” of disciples. Just as in Egypt, this Last Supper was a time before a great journey and a great mission. The Twelve shared the same bread, wine, and stories as their ancestors but Christ Himself would shed the “blood of the lamb” that would save them from death. He was the Lamb of God.

Jesus Passover Meal Jesus changes the Jewish Passover ritual at His Last Supper and starts something new. Taking unleavened bread and table wine He declares, “This is my Body, and this is my Blood. This is myself. *It is freely given for you.*” We hear an echo from Genesis about freedom and self-giving love. This Supper reaches back to the creation of the world. In this ritual, Jesus enacts the deepest of human events, the total and free gift of self. He offers nothing else

than His very person. He *becomes* food for us to take in, to in-corporate in us. He *identifies* Himself with these gifts of bread and wine, and they become for us His real body and blood. It is a complete ritual act of self-giving communication and connection with us.

Catholics understand the presence of Jesus in bread and wine very profoundly. Our awe and surprise that God would even bother with us in such a personal way and our shock that God still cares for us after all that we have done leads us to make a free response for what we have received. Our response is simple. *What He does, we are to do.* As He lives, we live, because we follow His command; “Do this in remembrance of me.” Like Adam and Eve, we are to “ingest” this action. But this time, instead of ingesting greed and selfishness, we take in love and service. We *do* for others. Quite a difference! Jesus offers in a ritual meal the experience of life we are to lead. This ritual would find its fullest expression in the events of the passion, ...at Calvary.

He Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Died, and was Buried

Salvation at last The passion of Jesus shows the *source* and *solution* to the evil and violence of our world that began with the envy of Adam and Eve and the murder of Abel by Cain. If you want to see what our sins looks like or what they do to people, look at the crucifix.

Not a moment too soon for we have made such a mess of things ourselves. Since the first sin in the Garden we have twisted human relationships; our being-for-each-other. We have chosen to live only for ourselves and that has made us

so unhappy. Yet our salvation cannot happen on our own. Jesus is the person sent by God to return us to our real human nature.

Meeting Jesus involves more than the exchange of names that we do in ordinary social settings. Meeting Jesus is an *encounter* that surfaces pointed questions about who we are. We cannot meet Jesus on the cross and stay the same!

A Mirror On the Cross, Jesus reflects us back to ourselves. The cross is, in a way, *a large mirror* in which we recognize and see our own hurtful and violent behavior. It is not a pretty picture, for it shows aggressive power, sin, selfishness, and uncaring jealousy. The vulnerability of Jesus surfaces evil and that evil is ugly to see in the light of day. People who love power, who love control, who are arrogant, and proud, cannot tolerate one who seeks vulnerability and service to our neighbor. *Those evil people will band together in a unity based on hate and kill the vulnerable one.* Although it is a unity of common purpose, it is not a unity that unites in love *for each other*. It is unity that degrades rather than enhances humanity.

There are all kinds of reasons why people come together but hate should not be one of them. The Jerusalem mob joined together in hate, jealousy, and fear, and they crucified the Lord. This crucifixion is the direct result of fear and arrogance, pride and selfishness, and manipulative power; all the legacy of Adam and Eve. God always intended to send His Son, but our sin made His reception different.

Paradoxically, Jesus *used* our arrogance in a way that might change it forever. He took our sin and displayed it for all to see in all its horror. On the cross Jesus shows us our sins so that we might be horrified at them, be moved deep within our hearts, and *perhaps change*. These sins are that awful to see. His crucifixion is horrific because the truth about *us* is so hard to bear.

Compassion Gazing at the cross we see the physical and spiritual effects of sin in the very person and wounds of Jesus. These wounds, however, have this effect precisely because of our human God-given design. We cannot gaze at the figure of Jesus on the cross and remain unmoved. *What our eyes take in moves directly to our heart.* What we see on this cross shakes us to our core. Such wounds received for so completely loving us. Such a love that would resolutely bear these wounds that we might begin to see the “cost” of our actions and so begin to feel the “price” God was willing to pay. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son for us.” (John 3:16) Now we know what “gave” meant. His wounds evoke a very unique and deeply human experience which is fundamental to our nature as men and women. These wounds cause us to act in a way unparalleled among any other living beings. The sight of Jesus on the cross moves us to *feel the deepest compassion..*

Our hearts are moved and changed at the sight of an innocent one of our own in trouble.

God made us, in the Genesis story, to care for our brothers and sisters on Earth. To act against this care is really to go against the grain of our real human nature. Sometimes we don’t even notice. Routine and habit help us take each other for granted. Love can fade too, like dying embers of a fire lit long ago. But sometimes we know what we are doing. We know it is wrong to hate and so we cleverly deny we even do it. We dehumanize or “objectify” the other because it is naturally too difficult to accept we are hurting a fellow person. Joining a mob helps hide responsibility. Only a powerful act of love can break that habit and Jesus provides this love on the Cross, even for His enemies. This compassion leads to courage and the strength we need to face evil, stand up to violence, and stop aggressors, and to do it all with love.

The woman caught in adultery (John. 8:3) is a perfect microcosm of the passion and our salvation.

The mob points an accusing finger at her. They are united and place her “outside” the mob, just as the mob placed Jesus “outside.” It is so much easier to kill outsiders. His challenge to the crowd about their sinfulness shows the woman and the crowd are the same; *both sinners*. She then becomes “inside.” The crowd cannot kill one of their own so they melt away.

This deep and courageous compassion, this love we have for Jesus our brother who first loved us, is our salvation through Jesus. We band together in love and actively care for an innocent one as well as help evildoers to change. In that moment, we return to our real self. We return to each other, as we were first founded in the Garden and we return to God, ...and it’s about time.

Jesus would often look at those He had just cured of some disease and say “*Your Faith has been your salvation!*” When He noticed and felt their belief, their love, and their deep hope in Him, made possible first by His love for them, He announced a cure. More than just their disease was healed. It is precisely that moment when our heart opens to another that a life is healed. It is precisely that moment when our heart opens to the grace of God that the long reign of sin ends for us. We are healed and redeemed by the God who first loved us. *Only the Love of God is powerful enough to initiate that openness.* (See Matt. 9:22, Mk. 5:34, 10:52, Lk. 7:50, 8:48, 17:19, 18:42)

Jesus Christ, Our Answer, Our Salvation

Powerful Jesus act of love redeems us by providing the definitive way out of sin for all people and all time. That is good news because our own choices certainly haven’t worked! Left to ourselves we have done little for lasting peace. Only Jesus, the Son of God, could provide the sure way out of the corner in which we have

Painted ourselves. *Our response to this incredible act of love by Jesus brings us His gift of salvation.* The way of Christ remains the only way for all humanity, everywhere on the planet, and at every moment in time. Only the free and unconditional love of God could move stubborn people like us and break through years of cynicism and mistrust. Only when sin is brought directly in front of our face do we see its horror. Only Jesus the Son of God could do this, and loved us enough to do it.

Freely Chosen God is free, autonomous, and *did not have to save us*. It is amazing that He would even consider it because our usual response to pain is to lash out in revenge. But Jesus has a habit of going after lost sheep. He did not have to save us but freely chose to do so. It is a completely unilateral act, whether we respond in gratitude or not....

Because we are free Jesus has no assurance we will respond at all. His dying on the cross is truly an *unconditional act of self-giving*. Jesus went through Calvary precisely because it was the loving thing to do, and did so whether we responded or not. Although it is our nature to love, we are more than able to go against our own best interests and reject love. Nevertheless, God freely chooses to show us this picture of sin in His very self, in the person of His Son, *precisely because He loves us*. He wants us to live fully, joyfully, and completely. He wants us to return to the Garden. He wants us to be happy. Look at what He will do to have that happen.

Fully Aware He knows us well and yet loves despite our stubbornness. More than anyone else Jesus remembers our freedom to reject what is good, choose sin, and shoot ourselves in the foot. Yet He loves even knowing it may not be returned. He feels these ideas in agonizing moments in the Garden of Gethsemane before His arrest. God is once again mindful, in the person of Jesus, that a consequence of His gift of free will might be rejection, ...and once again it

happens in a garden.

Abandoned Jesus' freely chosen action of self-giving is total, without thought of reward. As always, He feels the lack of compassion from the crowd. His love reaches out to a vacuum. He feels the solitude that our sins cause, and it is a profound aloneness, such that even God seems far away. He cries out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (*Matthew 27:46*). (It is the beginning of Psalm 22 which ends eventually in glorious praise of the *presence* of God). But it is precisely this subjective experience of abandonment by the ever-rewarding God the Father that Jesus the Son can exercise complete unconditional love. He loves, even with the necessary and perceived experience of the absence of God and the rejection of the people. This is the supreme moment of His grace-filled human life. He feels the terror of acting in complete isolation, yet chooses to continue His loving actions in the face of utter aloneness and abandonment. He chooses to love anyway.

Unconditional Our human love can take on the style of a commercial enterprise, with "gifts" that are exchanged back and forth and tallied in some kind of psychic ledger. In this commercial love, we do favors only if others will do favors for us. We expect a return on the "investment" of our time or activity. Some may not act at all unless assured of return.

Jesus cares with no strings attached which is very rare. Are we not suspicious at advertisements that offer "free gifts" or a shopkeeper who declares, "No charge!" Yet, Jesus heals, forgives, teaches, inspires, and reconciles because He wants to do these things. There is nothing commercial about this behavior. Jesus does not even *require* our acceptance to receive His love.

Courageous From that love we receive courage. We find the strength to discover and fulfill our mission in life because of His enduring and constant love for us. We can love too, even in the face of executioners, uncaring spectators,

fearful apostles, disappearing disciples, and jeering soldiers. We love, even in our own Gethsemane; contemplating all that will to come to pass about ourselves. We love, in our stumbling, lurching, mortal stagger up each day's Calvary. Jesus faced each moment courageously with love. Jesus faced each moment of the passion with no weapons, speeches, or tricks. It was striking enough that He faced them at all. Jesus marched resolutely through a whole lifetime of challenge with courage and simple old-fashioned bravery. Whether the crowd shouted for His coronation, or His head, He was always true to Himself and the agenda set by His Father in Heaven. He did the right thing, even when the difficult thing. Calvary was horrific, but He did not walk around, over, or away from it. He marched straight through His way of the cross to Easter Sunday.

That reveals our path. Jesus calls us forward in life in a great dynamic adventure of faith, not back to some static, unchallenged doldrum of indecision. On the Cross Jesus reveals a way that moves directly forward through the hard blows, and we are to follow Him. It is a simple command, but a paradox, though, and puzzling at first glance. Like the command from Moses to the Israelites to march toward an impassable Red Sea (with Egyptians thundering close behind), the command to follow Jesus through the cross is counter-intuitive. Like the command of Jesus to Peter to get out of a boat in a storm and walk on tumbling waves in the Sea of Galilee (*Mt. 14:29*), the way of the cross is a surprise. Just as the Red Sea parted so will our suffering be overcome and even our impending death will be transformed. Just as Peter found true safety *outside the boat* with Jesus in the storm, so will our own cross be transformed. Jesus teaches us to go forward, and to go forward with courage.

This courage of Jesus is precisely what we need in a difficult world. He came not so much to remove suffering but rather to give us a way to go through it. After all, Jesus has come and gone and the realities of war, poverty, and disease are

still too common. The harshness of the world tempts us to run away seeking safety and refuge, or yearn for simpler and safer times. Religion itself can become a refuge or safe harbor for frightened souls, wounded by the events of life. Religion can be a kind of nostalgia, a longing for the womb-like safety of a walled-off enclave. Such is not the plan of the Lord or the way to salvation and such is not the role of the Church!

Our Joy and Our Peace Jesus clearly announces in the Gospel of John why He was sent to our dangerous planet. They are worth memorizing for they reveal why this whole story happened.

“I have come that you might have JOY, and that your JOY might be complete,” (*John 10:10*)

“I have come that you might have LIFE, and have it to the full,” (*John 15:11*)

“PEACE is my gift to you, and PEACE is my farewell to you.” (*John 14:27*)

He came for us to use these gifts to make it through our own Calvary as He did, with courage, with peace, with joy. He does not bring safety and security, but courage and boldness to actively and resolutely change what we can in the world and endure what we cannot. He does not bring nostalgia, but adventure. Peace, and a full life lived with joy are His legacy. On the cross, Jesus lived all these virtues. He took care of His mother and the thief. He forgave His executioners. He expressed His thirst for water. He did all these with generosity of spirit, *even while suffering intensely*. They are His gift to us as well.

Our Resolve Gazing at the cross both the evil of sin and the depth of God's love sink into our soul. We are awestruck that He would go through this for our benefit. “No greater love does anyone have than to lay down one's life for another” (*Jn.15:13*). We are moved that the Son of God would even die a horrific human death to

show us our selfishness and to rescue us from evil. That love can change us forever. *We can decide to follow Jesus. We can resolve to never treat anyone else in a hateful manner. We can decide to be for each other as helpmates and treat no person as an outsider. We can decide to face evil, stop evildoers, and challenge our brothers and sisters who hate.* We can decide to live as Adam and Eve once did and commit to living and loving as Jesus actually did. We can decide to live all these powerful resolutions with the courage, the peace, and the joy that are His gifts to us.

God does save us against our will so we must do our part, and it is something we *do*. Just as the Israelites had to walk through the Red Sea, salvation comes in the *doing*, the *living*, and the *loving* as Jesus loved. A young man asks in Mark 10:17, “What must I do to achieve eternal life?” Jesus responds with the behaviors of the Ten Commandments and the gift of a heart offered with no strings attached. The young man refuses and Jesus lets him freely go because He does not save us against our will. He respects our dignity and our freedom. But the cross is powerful and can penetrate our stubbornness.

Our Nature On our own cross we face some challenge and in that moment we mature. We face our self and our abilities. No one else can live that moment for us so we personally feel our “abandonment” as Jesus felt on the cross. In this deep aloneness we must decide how to respond, but we are not without help. Our own God-given human nature reveals a path of love. This decision to love might move us to a new place in our personal history but is actually familiar in that it is our original nature.

Our decision to follow Christ also means *joining ourselves to His experience* of the ultimate event; His own death. But why did He have to die? Would not suffering be enough to engender enough compassion within us? Why such a horrible death?

Jesus Dies on the Cross

Death... What a darkness death is. It is uncomfortable and awkward yet deeply mysterious. Many in our youth oriented culture avoid it completely. However, the anxiety we have about death reveals its power. For something that awaits every single person, it is for many an unexamined experience.

Death tells us that we do not have all the time in the world. It tells us that life is limited and will one day come to an end. There is, then, one and only one chance to live the moments of life we have. There is no rehearsal, second chance, or return engagement so the moments of time we have are important gifts meant to be used wisely.

Rather than something scary, death teaches us to take hold of life and live each moment well. Knowing our future ends in death makes our present so much more precious, vivid, and real. Today can be lived only once. so choosing this or that action becomes a more compelling human action.

Choosing to face death *for another's sake* is the most powerful decision we can make. In every generation and culture in history, no other act is considered more compelling than laying down one's life for another. Choosing to use our one, unique, and unrepeatable present moment of our life for another's welfare, *even if it means the end of our own life* is the greatest act of love. People who dive into flood waters to rescue a drowning person, who rush into fires to save a child, who stand up to aggression to free a victim from a mob, are *archetypal* heroes. They act in the greatest tradition of humanity and they act in love. Jesus chose to use His life for just such a love, even in the face of death.

Once given, Jesus cannot take the gift of His life back. It is irrevocable in the fullest sense of the word. If He dies...He dies, and that life is over

once and for all and there is no changing one's mind in midstream! Time only moves forward, even for Jesus, and that moment will never return which is why the heroic giving of one's life for another is so compelling. That hero cannot try again. Life is over... irrevocably... permanently.

The hero does not even get to experience the good effects of a heroic act. With such a sacrifice you would hope to at least see the results of your actions, as parents can when they see their children graduate. The years of sacrifice and saving for tuition for a good education become worthwhile at a the graduation ceremony and the success of their child. When joyful results are visible the sacrifice "disappears." Jesus acknowledges this "disappearance of pain" in the example of childbirth (*Jn. 16:21*). A mother's discomfort and the experience of labor are soon forgotten in the joy of new life at childbirth. Such rewards can change our memory of pain and make bearable the sacrifices of parents or anyone who works hard for noble goals.

However, when the sacrifice is death there is no participation in the result for death allows no return to see what happens. The passion of Jesus is not the impulsive leap of a person fueled by adrenaline rushing into a fire. It is foretold and awaited as a natural consequence of the sinfulness of evil people. Jesus thought carefully about what He was doing. He did not choose death but would not avoid it either. Such is this dramatic, compelling, majestic, mysterious, awesome, and powerful event of the freely chosen path of Christ. It reaches us at the deepest archetypal level.

Archetype The passion and death of Jesus compel our attention on a number of archetypal levels, and His story is paralleled in stories from cultures around the world as well. This most important revelation of God the Father in Jesus must be powerful enough to reach obstinate people like ourselves so it must be strong enough to penetrate several thousand centuries

of sinful habits. It must be revealed in a human way that is “built in” to our way of being and doing in the world. After all, it must reach every culture, every age, and every person in a way that God already designed to be compelling. Although Jesus shares in such common human archetypes as Martyr, Sacrificial Scape-goat, Ransomed Captive, and Atonement Death, none of these archetypes completes or defines our salvation story. Even though we can find elements of each in the life of the Lord, no single one of them summarizes His life and purpose.

Atonement Jesus “atones” for our sins in that original meaning of “to make *at-one* with.” His death reunites us with God. It does not forestall angry retribution or stop the revenge of an irate God, ready to kill us all. Jesus is not holding God “at bay.” More than dying “in place” of us, Jesus died *for us*. The love of Jesus the Son is not different from or in opposition to the love of God the Father. The Father and the Son are one in their love and desire for our happiness. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son for us” (Jn 3:16). Jesus' life is the will of His Father in heaven. That alone makes His life and death unique. No one else in history could or will ever make that claim again. Other persons have shared the archetypes but no one else shared *identity* with God.

Scapegoat The sacrificial scapegoat is one of the oldest archetypes in our psychic library. Our checkered history is filled war and violence. Conflicts swiftly become dangerous and hard to settle. Each side responds with vengeance to every perceived affront in an ever escalating cycle of violence. Since we cannot actually “feel” another’s pain we never quite feel justified in our revenge. It then becomes impossible to “get even,” so each act of revenge must increase in intensity until someone dies. Scapegoating provides an “answer.” Rather than reach a deadly stage, each side would attack a third party, often a nearby but innocent person. But what if the person had relatives who would certainly threat-

en revenge in return? The victim had to be either “outside” the community so as not to start another cycle of revenge from within, ...or they would use an animal, a nearby but unfortunate goat; the “scapegoat.” The death or banishment of the goat appeased the former combatants and calmed their passions. In the Gospel, it even fostered unity between Pilate and Herod who had been former enemies. They became friends when they condemned Jesus to death (Luke 23:12). They now had a common enemy and by killing the “other” or the “outsider” they found peace with each other. The “scapegoating mechanism” is an old dynamic to create unity but a unity based on hate. The mob at Calvary united in a common bond of revenge and killed. They drew a line encircled around themselves, excluding the “dehumanized other,” and made Jesus into a scapegoat; an “outsider.”

For all that was done to Him, Jesus does not seek revenge. *Jesus ends this cycle of revenge at His crucifixion. He identifies Himself with the scapegoat.* The Gospel story of Jesus on the cross is the first time the scapegoat story is told from the viewpoint of the “goat.” **By being the victim, Jesus declares there is no such thing as a scapegoat, or a person “outside” the group.** He redraws the circle to include every person on the planet. *All people are sacred. All are our brothers and sisters, even those who haven’t felt the love of God yet, even those who are crucifying Him. They do not know what they are doing.*

Jesus also caused people to bond together, but in a unity and bonding based on compassion and love. “Better that one man die than the whole nation should perish,” as His accusers warned (Jn. 11:50). Although His death may have appeased the anger and jealousy of a few local leaders of His day, His scapegoat role did not end as it usually did for scapegoats. His death *continued* to call people together, this time in love. His death was truly unique.

Jesus Dies as a Human Person and a Man

In the moment of death Jesus experienced the event that ultimately separates our human existence from God. We are finite beings living in time, moving day by day towards our death. God is infinite, outside of space and time, and unchanging, not moving toward any death. Jesus is the presence of God who lives in our ever-changing human space and our ever-moving human time. Jesus lives to fully complete the experience of human death and the end of human life. It completed His total sharing of the human experience. His death indicated the length that Jesus would go to change our hearts. *Only this freely chosen path has the power to reach us at our deepest level of experience.* What kind of a person would do this?

Who would die for me? Do we believe anyone would do this for us? How would we know? Before the event, while still alive, it is still only a guess that a person would die for us. But what would that death say about that person? A lot. Only the death of human person who loves that powerfully can cut through years of the habit of sin and capture our attention.

Jesus lives and dies a message of peace, compassion, care, and service to one another. It was important that a fellow human being bring this message. No goat will do. Only words and deeds coming from one like us could reach our stubbornness. Only a fellow person who walked with us and shared in human life has the credibility to speak. Thank God Jesus showed a path toward hope that is real and possible. We can recognize our own possibilities in the life of one like us. There had to be a Messiah who was a person.

It was also significant that Jesus was male. This is not for any prejudicial masculine reason, and certainly not for any sense of male superiority, or gender discrimination. The story of Genesis

clearly affirms our equal dignity and worth. However, men and women have been considered down through the ages to have different stereotypical attributes or personality differences. Although equal in dignity, men and women have different ways of being in the world. Whether these stereotypes are the result of biological nature or familial nurture is an age-old debate, but there is no doubt about their appearance in the written history of human society. Certainly the clear testimony of written history attests to a few general stereotypical male-female attributes. It is to this very human society with its historical gender specific stereotypes that God makes His appearance in the human person of Jesus, the man from Nazareth.

For example, men have been seen historically and stereotypically as public leaders in most cultures, while women have been seen as nurturers of families. These stereotypical gender qualities have both positive and negative aspects. Positively, both roles contribute to human progress. Negatively, male leadership can grow to become a kind of domination and female nurturing can become a destructive form of emotional manipulation. While we know everyone, both male and female, can turn their life toward either of these kinds of sin, the negative stereotype involving public violence and domination on a large scale is mainly the legacy of men. The special legacy of violence and brute force among the human family, from Cain down to our time, has been largely the work of men. Although we can be sure that women are just as capable of this sin, tradition and history records and places the majority of great historical moments of organized violence, waging of war, and fighting battles, on men. The notion of brute force, military power, and physical coercion, while not limited only to men are nevertheless generally considered stereotypical negative *male* attributes.

A message of peace, a message of non-violence, a message of service to each other would sound more ordinary in the voice of a woman, in which

resides the positive stereotype of loving care. This message would seem only natural in the person of a nurturing female. But it would be extraordinary, and so stand out, in the voice of a man, for it has been men who have borne the history of violence and power in the world. Those acts are seen as traditionally male actions. A man could therefore more credibly carry a counter message to those who have traditionally been the perpetrators of these sinful violent actions. *A man willing to sacrifice His life could credibly carry this message to those who so often take human life.* It was significant, therefore, for Jesus the Christ to first, be a human being, sharing fully in our human nature, and second, it was significant that this Jesus be a male human person.

The revelation of God in the person of Jesus and the revelation of His deep and abiding and unconditional love, comes across loud and clear precisely to those who most need to hear it.

Whether violence comes in war or gossip or the countless other ways we find to hurt each other, it is the passion of Jesus that saves us. On Friday Jesus revealed what He did on Thursday at the Last Supper and what He does for us at every Mass. We need to experience this saving presence of God as often as we can. Only the passion, death, and resurrection reveals the way out of the problem begun by Adam and Eve. Only this event reveals the source and solution to finding peace in our world.

On the Third Day He Rose Again

Lazarus was resuscitated from death but would die again someday (Jn. 11:43). Jesus was *resurrected* to a glorified body and that is different. Death had no more power over Him. The resurrection revealed that God fully accepted the total gift of self that Jesus accomplished on the cross. It meant that Jesus truly is the unconditional love of God which has been ours from the beginning of time. It says that self-giving love works and makes us happy and fulfilled even when facing a

Calvary. Even with unemployment, sickness, or poverty we can find courage, peace, and purpose.

No one creates him or herself. We kind of “discover” ourselves alive and sense that our life is a “gift” from someone else. What we receive as a gift, we give as a gift. That is the attitude of Christ. We use our abilities, talents, and character, everything that is our self and choose to use them for some good purpose and with no fear. Faith brings us meaning and courage. Whether rich or poor, old or young, famous or obscure, we are crucial to the plan of God and must do our part. Our faith is not for spectators, but for those who take up a cross. If we do not die to ourselves we cannot rise into this joy for there is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday. If we hold on to our fears, we lose everything. But resurrection means even death loses power. We can make the world a better place!

Our faith is not nostalgia or merely remembering the things that happened to Jesus. Our belief is not simply a memory of mystical events two thousand years ago. Our faith is now, today, and in this moment right here and now. Our purpose is to have our own resurrection from sin. It is about having Christmas and Easter ourselves; to-day, now, and right where we live! We know that this life works because Christianity is still here. It could not have lasted twenty one centuries unless it actually did bring peace, joy, and fulfillment even in our difficult world. It could not last unless it was our very nature to be religious. Our faith is not something imposed from the outside, but “discovered” already within. The proof of the truth of Christ is not in logical propositions, empirical studies, or spectacular signs, although faith is logical, rational, and often miraculous. The final proof is the actual experience of salvation, the sense of deep fulfillment, and the sheer joy we have in Christ. It works!

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THE PASSION of the Christ **A film by Mel Gibson**

The passion of Jesus shows the source and solution to the evil and violence of our world that began with the envy of Adam and Eve and the murder of Abel by Cain. If you want to see what our sins looks like or what they do to people, look at the crucifix.

The sequence of violence begins with revenge for some hurt, accusing and blaming others, and even getting others to form a mob to attack. Jesus lived in a way that *surfaced* the evil or goodness in people. In the film we see that evil in the blaming, scapegoating, and painful executing of Jesus. We see different people join together in a mob and point accusing fingers at Him. A mob provides anonymity and hides responsibility but the film helps us point to our self.

One controversy is the issue of "Who killed Jesus?" The Gospel is no mere "detective story" in which we discover "who did it" so we can punish them in revenge. That is the very problem Jesus came to solve. If we walk away from this film pointing an accusing finger at any group, *then we don't have to point a finger at our self.* We are off the hook and Satan wins. Mary's soulful look into the audience at the descent from the cross is important and beautifully filmed. *Mary's look lets no one off the hook.*

The Jewish trial and Roman interrogation help us understand the charges and show both good and bad people among the leaders and in the crowd. This makes it harder to blame any one group as a whole; Greeks, Romans or Jews. The film makes it difficult to avoid *self examination.*

The woman caught in adultery is a perfect microcosm of the passion and our salvation. The mob points an accusing finger at her. They are united and place her "outside" the mob, just as the mob placed Jesus "outside." It is so much easier to kill outsiders. His challenge to the crowd about their sinfulness shows the woman and the crowd are the

same; both sinners. She then becomes "inside." The crowd cannot kill one of their own so they melt away. Her hand slowly reaching to His feet reveals she had been flat on the ground about to die. It is a profoundly beautiful and moving image of humble gratitude. It should be ours as well.

So many people in the film change when they meet Jesus. (You cannot meet Jesus and stay the same!) They notice his intense suffering and sense His innocence and it fills them with compassion. For Christians, *compassion leads to courage* and the strength to fight evil and face the crowd, like Simon of Cyrene who helps carry the cross. Compassion that leads to courage is the solution. This is a perfectly named movie. His *passion* evokes deep *compassion* from Simon the Cyrene, some of the Romans, Pilate's wife, the good thief, and even Caiphas, who is rattled a bit at the cross at hearing of his forgiveness by Jesus.

Many people would seek fast revenge after hours of cruelly inflicted pain, but this film helps us reflect on the kind of person who says at *the exact moment* the nails go in, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" This is the only movie ever to show this level of graphic suffering so those words mean so much more. Jesus did not want to suffer but would do so out of great love and to show us *what violence and our sins actually do* and to save us from them. "For God so loved the world that He gave us His only Son." Now we know what "gave" meant. Now we know we must change, but that change will bring salvation and profound peace.

-Fr. Dave Heney, February 2004
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