

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

### Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

**Title: Into the Stream of God's Passion - (Part Two)**

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I spoke yesterday of our giving - God's giving - as having something to do with more than just meeting needs. We're never simply talking of a wish list, presented to God and God responding. We are never in our *own* attitude to giving just talking about meeting needs. The primary thing I suggested is the overflow of God. And certainly to approach God with a wish list, with what I think of as my *wants*, isn't a very helpful way of coming to God. Once we have said that, there is also a considerable importance in recognising that precisely because of the transforming nature of God's gift to us (the gift that changes us, the gift that makes us givers), God's giving of his life to us also changes and transforms our wants, our needs, so that our very *wanting* is caught up by God.

This is one of the things that happens in Christian intercessory prayer. My needs, my wants, what I think is desirable, are somehow taken up into the stream of God's action and God's wanting. We drop our own needs and wants into the stream of God's life and God's movements. And I think you could put that even more boldly and say we drop our needs and our wants into the stream of *God's wanting, God's passion*.

That phrase "God's passion" is what I want to put at the centre of this morning - God's longing, God's urgency. There's a wonderful phrase by the Benedictine writer, Sebastian Moore, who spoke of re-thinking the idea of 'the will of God' in terms of God's 'longing to be' in our world. The will of God is God's longing to be there in our world and I think that gives a much less abstract feel to talking about 'the will of God'. There is this passion of God to be here, to be with us, in us, and we in him.

So when we pray, when we articulate what we want and long for, specifically as Christians, we drop those needs and wants and desires into the longing of God - God's passionate longing to be in the world. And we trust that our longings and wants and God's longing and want can somehow be brought together. Here we have obviously to draw a distinction. We are all quite good at identifying what we want with what God wants - I am *not* talking about that. It's a bit like the way we say after the departure of a relative, "it's what she would have wanted" when we go on doing exactly what is convenient for us.

Very often we approach God and say it's what God would want. I think the process for a Christian praying is much more like exposing our wants and needs and longings to the fierce light of God's passion. I think that light and energy work on them, exposing our needs and wants to be taken up and purified and transformed. That is my starting point.

Given that we don't just want to talk about God's gift meeting needs, we do need to talk about needs at some point, and to talk about them in terms of how our own human projects and

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

longings and desires are touched and transfigured by this great passionate longing for God to be here, to be actively with us and in us.

So the second bit is, of course, the problem. If we are going to talk about exposing our needs and our wants to God – dropping them into the stream of his longing – we have to learn a bit about our needs and our wants, we have to do the exposing, we have to bring to light what we really want. A phrase from another modern Roman Catholic writer, a Dominican, Herbert McCabe, who said, “Christian ethics is all about doing what you want”; and then he adds “the difficult thing is finding out what you *really* want under God”.

It is quite hard to draw out, to bring to speech, what we really want or what we really long for, where our passion is pointing. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be as well,” said Jesus. So where is our treasure? Where do our hearts point? Jesus expects us, it seems, to be aware of our wants, to be passionate people. Listening to the way Jesus in the gospel relates to those who come to him, it often seems to me that, when Jesus says to someone, “What do you want me to do for you?”, he is saying, “I want to hear it from *you*. I want you to tell me what *you want*.” So, it is no good the paralytic and the leper just sitting there. The leper, the paralytic, the sinful person, whoever, has to say, “I want to be made whole.”

“What do you want?”, says Jesus. “Isn’t it obvious?”, says the paralytic. “No,” says Jesus, “I want you to tell me. What do you want?”

Think of the man by the side of the pool of Bethesda in St John’s Gospel who has been there for all those years; Jesus says, “do you *want* to get better?”. And it is actually quite a good question. Bringing our wants to light, standing before God and saying what we want, what we long for, is a very important moment; and Jesus himself is someone who is very eloquent about his wanting. “I have come to bring fire upon the earth, and I feel so pressed in until that fire is kindled”, says Jesus in St Luke. He is a passionate person, he *wants* the kingdom with intensity. And he expects us to own our wanting in something of that way.

I think it is very hard to read the gospels and emerge with the idea that the ideal Christian response is a sort of mild preference for the kingdom of God. Jesus spreads out the glories and treasures of God’s future for human beings and people say, “That’s very nice. Don’t call us!” So often that is our response. There is a wonderful line in that 18th-century Eucharistic hymn by Philip Doddridge:

“why are these dainties all in vain before unwilling hearts displayed?”

Nobody would write a hymn like that these days! But- what a wonderful couplet. Aren’t you hungry? Here is food. And these words about hungering and thirsting for righteousness trip off our tongues and we forget that hunger and thirst are deep, painful experiences. But this is an age in which passion and longing of that kind are not all that fashionable.

We’re far more interested in our present culture, in itches and scratches, in functionalism, in the kind of need that can be followed by gratification. We’re interested in slotting wants and gratifications together tidily. As for Jesus’ kind of hunger and passion (“I have come to bring fire upon the earth”), hungering and thirsting for justice - these things are not so fashionable.

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

Look at our attitudes to all sorts of things, our attitude to sex and food and politics (to take three of the most important things in human experience). We have often talked as though we lived in a society that was absolutely devoured by sexual desire. But it isn't. Our society is obsessed with (forgive me!) sexual itching and scratching, with needs and gratifications. It is not actually very interested in, and it doesn't cope very well with, real passion. Real, lasting, self-involving passion is an embarrassment to this culture which so prides itself on being candid about sex. It has been said that Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* says more about the wild intensity of obsessive sexual passion in half a line than any 20th-century writer. So we are not, in fact, a passionate culture in that respect. Our attitudes, corporately, to sexuality are often about needs and gratifications, not about deep and self-involving longings. And our attitudes to food are dictated so often by convenience and impatience. This is the century of fast food, the century of convenient packaging which takes our physical hunger right away from all those occasions of social converse, taking time, courtesy and joy that once belonged to eating.

We might, I think, quite reasonably argue that the curse of our age was not so much an irresponsible attitude to sex, though that's part of it, but an irresponsible attitude to food. A hamburger is as dangerous as a pornographic magazine in its own way (discuss!).

And what about politics? Is there passion in politics at the moment? Well there is something deeply emotional going on in Prime Minister's Question Time but I don't think it's passion exactly. Again the longing that creates integrity, the longing that is so profound that it draws plans and ideals and images together into something coherent and lasting - that kind of passion is more and more eroded in an age of sound bites and rapid reactions and point scoring.

I think our politics is a very *un*passionate affair at the moment. I've no idea *what* those people at Prime Minister's Question Time care about, I haven't a clue - beyond the obvious fact that they care about 'winning this round'. And more and more in between elections it looks as though an election is simply winning a round in the game of prestige points. So passion, real passion, the awakening of deep desires that mature and develop over time and draw things together, is a great Christian virtue, but it may be that it is something that we ought to be thinking about quite hard.

**There is a programme for stewardship: kindling people's passions.** Isn't that actually what you are trying to do?

Now the Church is not only a body that is affected by the culture around it, by the indifferent short-termism of the culture, it is also a body that inherits a lot of unease about the language of passion, the Anglican Church perhaps more than some others. Passion can sound deeply un-Anglican. Longing, yearning, eros, doesn't fit terribly well with our self-image. But the question we have to ask more and more as the Church grows up (I hope the Church may be doing that!) is what does the Church corporately want? What is the *passion* of the Church? What is the longing of the Church? And, as of each and every believer, the question must be asked at some point, what do you want of and for the Church? Try to be honest about that.

# Stewardship Forum

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If you want consolation, say so! But say something, identify some want, some hunger, that is there.

I spoke yesterday of the need to quarry in people for the sense of giftedness, to dig and probe for that sense of being held by God's out-pouring, giving life, and I add to that today the need to quarry and probe for passion. Stewardship is about helping people own their gifts for the Church. I say today that it is also about helping people own their needs and their longings in the Church.

Only then, I think, can we make sense of reflecting upon what the Church asks of us, what the body of the community asks of and for the individual - only if we ourselves, as believers, have some sense of what we want of and for the Church. Which is really saying, "What are we asking of ourselves as Church?"

The providence involved in reading books is very strange. I happened last weekend to be looking through a biography more than 30 years old, of Bishop Mervyn Haigh (of Coventry and then of Winchester) - a very Anglican, dispassionate character in many ways. But I was fascinated by the fact that in the early days of thinking about giving and Stewardship and so forth, what he did in Coventry and then in Winchester was to invite parishes, before discussing the quota, to state their needs and their aims. It is still an important matter. I had a go at this a year or two ago in a visitation, asking parishes what they wanted to see happening in the next five years and we had some very interesting (and slightly depressing) answers; but it is a very good principle that if we are going to talk about giving and sharing and all the rest of it, we talk also about wanting. What is it you long for? What's your passion for?

And, to go back to where I began, only when we are able to articulate something about that can we bring it and drop it, as something solid, worthwhile and real, into the stream of God's longing and God's passion.

**About the Author.** *Revd Dr Rowan Williams is the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. This talk was the second of two presentations at the Stewardship Network Conference in Newquay, 1996. Used with permission.*