**LIVE THE PRESENT WITH PASSION**

 **(Part 1)**

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Last month, we were reflecting on the past, creatively drawing on our memories in the presence of God and giving thanks to God for his continuing faithfulness and love for us throughout all the circumstances of our lives. When we are able **to be** in the present with an attitude of thankfulness, not of resentment, this can ignite the spark of passion in our hearts. Passion is not something to be identified with what is termed the passion of youth, or seen in such expressions as, “the flames of passion die out.”

What does it mean to live our lives with passion? It was well expressed by one of the great religious saints of the past, St Francis of Assisi. During those years of his conversion period, in the church of St Mary in Portiuncula, just outside Assisi, when he heard the words of the Gospel being read, calling him to a following of the gospel way of life, he responded from the depths of his heart:

*This is what I wish, this is what I am seeking, this is what I long for with all my heart.* (Thomas of Celano *First Life of St Francis* 9.22)

So, to live the present with passion, no matter what our age, means to be able to focus our lives on what it is that we long for with all our heart.

The very fact that I made my final commitment to Franciscan life means that I wished above all other things to live the Gospel, as St Francis says in his Earlier Rule, “to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ”, to allow my life to find its expression in living out what are called the Evangelical Counsels, the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience – the values of the Gospel. As Pope Francis says:

The religious vows were intended as a concrete expression of this passionate love for Jesus and for his way of life as expressed in the Gospel. (*Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*)

So, if as friars we wish to live the present with passion, it may be worth spending time reflecting on those values of the Gospel.

What lies at the heart of the gospel way of life is to be found in the first words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel according to Mark, “Repent and believe the Good News.”

**A SPIRITUALITY OF CONVERSION**

What is entailed in this call to repentance, the call to conversion? The call to repentance is different from the call to engage in what were termed penitential practices. My novitiate was the first year in which the practice was done away with, of going to your room at a certain time on Fridays and administering the discipline to yourself. The discipline involved hitting yourself on your bare back with a piece of knotted rope – I heard from the novices a year ahead of me that it was more often the mattress of the bed in their room that was hit rather than their bare backs. But that was what a life of penance was seen to involve – at least, by those in charge of formation in those times. To live a life of penance, or of continuing conversion, does involve denial of self, but the denial of self must be seen within the larger context of the fundamental meaning of the word conversion.

We can have no better example of the true meaning of conversion than St Francis. His experience of conversion began, as he himself relates, in his encounter with the woundedness and brokenness of lepers. Francis saw his contact with lepers as crucial to his conversion. In his Testament, written six months before he died, he described his conversion in terms of contact with lepers:

*The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus, to begin to do penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them, and I showed a heart full of mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.* (*Testament* 1)

In the Middle Ages, lepers were the lowest of the low. They had to shake a rattle when moving around so that people could know they were coming and to avoid them. Lepers were shut away by the authorities in types of hospices where dedicated people would care for them. Francis was the son of a wealthy clothing merchant. In his early twenties, he would have been part of the in-group in Assisi’s high society, one of the so called ‘beautiful people.’ Such people as lepers were definitely not part of his scene. But circumstances changed for Francis. He went off to fight as a knight but was taken prisoner and spent twelve long months in prison, months of enforced solitude away from the beautiful people. Here, his life started to change.

When he returned to Assisi, he was dissatisfied with his former way of life. He went through a prolonged period of indecision and uncertainty about his future. At a moment during this time, he came across a group of lepers who had strayed from one of the two leprosaria in the area. The encounter was both startling and unexpected. But now, rather than fleeing in the opposite direction, he approached them and engaged in a manner of human interaction wherein he came to see them not as objects to be feared but as suffering human beings not unlike himself. He was soon to go to where these people were staying, the leprosaria, and began to tend to their wounds and to bring comfort to those who were outcasts.

This unexpected encounter with lepers was to change his life radically. Where previously he had feared the brokenness and woundedness of the lepers, now they educated him. It was only when he was able to embrace woundedness and brokenness, to embrace that which he feared most, that he would experience the joy that comes when I cease to focus my life on me and my interests, and allow myself to be drawn out of myself in true compassion for the other. Francis was moved out of his comfort zone –but this was his liberation. The beautiful people for Francis were no longer the false and artificial celebrity set to which he had belonged, but his wounded and broken sisters and brothers who taught him where true beauty is to be found.

We all have our comfort zones – and to be fair, as limited human beings, we need them. But sometimes, experiences of woundedness and brokenness may shatter our comfort zone. This can make us very fearful. But we need to stop and to reflect and pray. Yes, this situation seems terrifying. I would much prefer to be in my comfort zone. I don’t know if I’ll be able to cope. Despite all my professions of faith, despite the vows to God that I made, I’m afraid and don’t know where to go. But, as with Francis, we need not to avoid or run away from our fears, but to embrace them. When we embrace that which we fear, we are transformed, and what seemed terrifying now becomes beautiful.

A Vietnamese Franciscan priest, Paul Vinh, told me that in 1973 he lived very much in his comfort zone. He was a professional architect who had decided to join the Franciscans in Vietnam, and in 1973 had made his profession of vows. He was happy with his decision. He lived and worked in reasonable, comfortable surroundings; he had his future work pretty well mapped out. But in 1975, his comfort zone was torn apart with the Communist victory in Vietnam. All religious communities were disbanded. He was sent to work in a forced agricultural co-operative, working long hours with minimal food and sustenance. He was forbidden to meet with other Franciscans. He told me that, for him, this was a long, dark night; he lived in fear of the future and dreamed of the rosy past.

Eventually, he was able to engage in secretive meetings with other Franciscans. They were able to pray together and gradually discerned that if they were to maintain their Franciscan identity, they should seek to do what Francis did. So, they volunteered to go to work with lepers, in the leper colonies within Vietnam that still exist today.

 Through this encounter with those who were broken, Paul once again came to believe that there was a future, that he came to believe in the power of compassion, that he came to forget his concerns about himself and once again learned to trust, to trust, using the words of Lady Julian of Norwich, that in the end, all would be well. Not that all would be well despite the experience of brokenness, but that all would be made well through the experience of brokenness. In 1989, the Vietnamese Government relaxed its strictures on church life, and religious communities could once again be formed.

Today, Paul is Rector of the Franciscan Formation Centre in Saigon, where there are over a hundred young Vietnamese men in their post-novitiate formation. Across the road is a community of Poor Clares numbering over sixty, two thirds of them being joyful and enthusiastic women under the age of thirty. Franciscan life, indeed, the life of the whole Church, has been rejuvenated in Vietnam because those who had experienced fear and brokenness, rather than trying to evade or escape from it, embraced their own fears, and reached out to embrace the broken ones, the poor and needy. The people loved them for doing this. Paul concluded what he was saying, “This has all resulted in something that is very beautiful.”

When we discover beauty and become caught up in pursuing it, our lives are filled with passion.

*(to be continued)*