

The COMpassion of the Christ



The focus upon the sufferings of Jesus isn't found within the New Testament itself (which devotes only a few paragraphs and very little of the details) and didn't emerge as a movement within western Christianity until soon after the dawn of the first millennium. From around 1100-1300AD, Europe was ravaged by wars and plagues. Incredible suffering was, during that time, just a fact of life. And nearly one out of three people died unnatural (and often agonizing) deaths. From this distance in time, it is easy to understand how identifying with Christ's suffering helped people sustain the will to just go on. And the church offered another reason: to share in the suffering of the passion was to take onto oneself some small portion of the retribution that God had demanded of Jesus for our sins.

It was during this time in history that several miraculous events were attributed to devotion to the passion of Christ. The most famous among them occurred in the little German hamlet of Oberammergau which pledged, while the plague was running rampant throughout middle Europe, to perform a Passion Play every decade if God would spare their town. The town was totally bypassed by the plague. And it still presents the play every ten years up to this day.

But what did Jesus himself say was the mark of a true follower?

"I am giving you a new commandment to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

"Just as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. So abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:9-12)

The mark of the true Christian - an authentic follower of Jesus Christ - is to be focused on his compassion not his passion. And he also said that he had allowed the crucifixion to happen. It was an essential part of God's Plan of the Atonement:

"This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it back again. No one is taking it from me; I lay it down of my own free will. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it back again. This is a command that I have received from my Father." (John 10:17-18)

Thousands, if not millions, of people were crucified by the Romans throughout their empire. Why does Jesus stand out alone among them? Because Jesus chose to die **just** so that he could rise again - and show us that we could do it, too:

"Truly, truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I am doing. He will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

The mark of a true Christian - a sincere disciple of Jesus Christ - is not their focus on his suffering but on the remedy for all suffering that he offered us. To be devoted to the passion is like a mother focusing on her labor pains instead of rejoicing on the potential of the new life that's come into the world. Why would anyone do that? The only answer that I know of is to instill guilt a child rather than work to empower it. Jesus came to be reborn as an entirely New Entity, a God Who was also a man, a man of such compassion that the end of all suffering was the reason why he was born.

By being focused on that end, we are continuing his work. To focus on his death is a dead end.