

THE PASSION OF JESUS

The renowned spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, shares how he once went to a hospital to visit a man dying of cancer. The man was still relatively young and had been a very hardworking and generative person. He was the father of a family and provided well for them. He was the chief executive officer in a large company and took good care of both the company and his employees. Moreover he was involved in many other organizations, including his church, and, because of his leadership abilities, was often the one in charge. But now, this once-so-active man, this person who was so used to being in control of things, was lying on a hospital bed, dying, unable to take care of even his most basic needs.

As Nouwen approached the bed, the man took his hand. It's significant to note the particular frustration he expressed: "Father, you have to help me! I'm dying, and I am trying to make peace with that, but there is something else too: You know me, I have always been in charge – I took care of my family. I took care of the company. I took care of the church. I took care of things! Now I am lying here, on this bed and I can't even take care of myself. I can't even go to the bathroom! Dying is one thing, but this is another! I'm helpless! I can't do anything anymore!"

Despite his exceptional pastoral skills, Nouwen, like any of us in a similar situation, was left rather helpless in the face of this man's plea. The man was undergoing an agonizing passivity. He was now a patient. He had once been active, the one in charge; and now, like Jesus in the hours leading up to his death, he was reduced being a patient, one who is ministered to by others. Nouwen, for his part, tried to help the man see the connection between what he was undergoing and what Jesus endured in his passion, especially how this time of helplessness, diminishment, and passivity is meant to be a time where we can give something deeper to those around us.

Among other things, Nouwen read the Passion narratives of the Gospels aloud to him because what this man was enduring parallels very clearly what Jesus endured in the hours leading up to his death, a time we Christians entitle, "the Passion of Jesus". What exactly was the Passion of Jesus?

As Christians, we believe that Jesus gave us both his life and his death. Too often, however, we do not distinguish between the two, though we should: Jesus gave his life for us in one way, through his activity; he gave his death for us in another way, through his passivity, his passion.

It is easy to misunderstand what the Gospels mean by the Passion of Jesus. When we use the word passion in relationship to Jesus' suffering we spontaneously connect it to the idea of passion as pain, the pain of the crucifixion, of scourging, of whips, of nails in his hands, of humiliation before the crowd. The Passion of Jesus does refer to these, but the word asks for a different focus here. The English word passion takes its root in the Latin, *passio*, meaning passivity, and that's its real connotation here. The word "patient" also derives from this. Hence what the Passion narratives describe is Jesus' passivity, his becoming a "patient". He gives his death to us through his passivity, just as he had previously given his life to us through his activity.

Indeed the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke can each be neatly divided into two distinct parts: In each Gospel we can split off everything that is narrated until Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and call this part of the Gospel: The Activity of Jesus Christ. Then we could take the section of the Gospels that we call "the Passion" and call that section: The Passivity of Jesus Christ. This would in fact help clarify an important distinction: Jesus gave his life for us through his activity

whereas he gave his death for us through his passivity. Hence: Up until his arrest, the Gospels describe Jesus as active, as doing in things, as being in charge, preaching, teaching, performing miracles, consoling people. After his arrest, all the verbs become passive: he is led away, manhandled by the authorities, whipped, helped in carrying his cross, and ultimately nailed to the cross. After his arrest, like a patient in palliative care or hospice, he no longer does anything; rather others do it for him and to him. He is passive, a patient, and in that passivity he gave his death for us.

There are many lessons in this, not least the fact that life and love are given not just in what we do for others but also, and perhaps even more deeply, in what we absorb at those times when we are helplessness, when we have no choice except to be a “patient”.