

8th November 2022

Service

**“We should employ our passions in the service of life,
not spend life in the service of our passions.”**

Richard Steele, *The Spectator* (1711)

My research on the theme of “passions” recently took me to the writings of St Paul, where passions are referred to frequently. But it’s almost always in the context of negativity, passions having to be avoided because they are sinful. Paul’s letters contain phrases such as: “passions are too strong”, “those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”, “not in passionate lust like the pagans”, “ungodliness and worldly passions”, “enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures”.

Of course Paul is seeking to counter the hedonistic and uncontrolled attitudes that prevailed for many in the culture of the day, and is pointing people to the “New Way” that Christian teaching and following Jesus offered – and, indeed, demanded. But here, surely, is a narrow view of passions, for it is almost exclusively in the arena of sexual desires and pleasures, and, even within that, seeing such things as being “of the flesh” and, therefore, sinful in nature. I’ll leave sexual passions to one side for now. But I do want to argue for the positive side of passions, and to affirm that passions, of the flesh, of humanity, are not always negative.

My friend Helen Stevens, who died in 2016, a colleague in the Iona Community, lived with passions. I was in awe of that. For here was a passionate “peace activist”. Her obituary in *The Scotsman*, contains this:

Helen could rightly be termed one of the leading Scottish pacifists of her era and was celebrated ... not only by her fellow campaigners in places like Greenham Common, but also by generals and leaders of NATO, who would invite her to lecture to them and attend her own conferences on Iona, confident that the arguments would be intelligently made, and their own opinions listened to with objectivity.

Helen was a woman of passion in all its fullness, a positive attitude of body, mind and soul. Hers were human passions of the flesh to be emulated and celebrated. So, hush your admonitions for now, St Paul, and let’s listen to Helen Stevens more and more. For here, surely, are passions in the service of life, a better life and a more peaceful one for us all.

A prayer for today

Lord, encourage my passions for justice, equity and peace today. Amen