As we approach Holy Week, we have a week to ponder our preparation – today we enter the season of Passiontide, which embraces Easter. Passion is a much overused word in our contemporary world, where we struggle to find authentic words and actions which emerge from deeply held convictions, as opposed to those which are expressed simply for effect. ‘What are your passions,’ is a frequent question at job interviews. ‘I’m passionate about …’ is one of the most widely used phrases in the short self-description biographies in job applications, at conferences, TV interviews and so on.

Perhaps it would be better to ask at those interviews, ‘What would you die for?’ What would you live, or die for? Some have suggested that the apparently inexorable rise in Islamic State is that in a world of superficial commitments and self-centred living, that at least it offers a cause which at least people are willing to die – and indeed kill – for. And that reveals the desperate need for others to come to the fore who are willing to commit themselves with equal and greater passion to the good of all, to the Kingdom of God.

So we have two weeks to ponder the Passion of Jesus, and to allow it to envelop and transform us, and our own passions. Our Archdeacon Missioner, Archdeacon Morris Rodham, is fond of asking enquirers about posts in the diocese, “What do you want to do for God before you die?” This week we discover what Jesus wanted to do for God before he died – or, more accurately, as he died. He wanted to save the world. He wanted to bring the whole of humanity back into a loving relationship with their creator, who longed to be known as their Father. We know this because of the witness of scripture, bringing to us both the words of Jesus, and those who spent time with him.

Today’s reading from St. Paul is one of the most significant: “Therefore, just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” Jesus was born, lived, died and rose again to set in place the greatest reversal the world has ever known … to set our faces back towards our Father and Creator, rather than away from him. And the precise language is important: justification and life for all. The Greek text is unambiguous here, and suggests that just as none are excluded from the turning away from God set out in the story of the Garden of Eden, so none are excluded from the bringing back to God set out in the Gospels and Epistles.

This can be a controversial view: will everyone make it to heaven? Rob Bell, the Christian author from the States wrote a series of bestsellers in the evangelical market before publishing a book called ‘Love Wins’, which really set the cat among the pigeons. Does it? Jimmy Lawrence – former student pastor here – once suggested to me there might be conservative Christian protests at his later conferences – placards saying, ‘Love Doesn’t Win!’ Where’s the challenge if everyone gets in anyway? But a friend from a conservative background explained to me just the other day how he recognized a flowering in his spirit as he embraced for the first time this idea of God’s love drawing everyone into salvation – it was like a breath of fresh air, straight from heaven. In truth, I don’t quite assume that everyone will be in heaven: I would like it to be true, I hope it will be true, but in the end, I believe that heaven is about welcoming people into a loving relationship with the Father, with Jesus, with one another – and you can’t force that kind of love on anyone. Some may turn away.

But Jesus died for that possibility – for the hope that all will be made alive, for ever, through his sacrifice of love on the cross. That was his passion. What’s yours?
What are your passions? And how do they relate to the Passion of Jesus? If our passions spring from his passion, and are in response to his giving of himself for us, then they, too, will share his power to transform the world. As you spend time in prayer over these next two weeks, ask God to form and direct your passions, and to discipline them to express his will of love for the world, as made real for us in Jesus Christ. Ask him by his Spirit to stir them up, and allow them to shape your life. And be filled with thanksgiving as you respond to the gift of life which was brought to you through the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.