This sermon is dedicated to Dr. Michael Goldstein who encouraged me to work on the issue of anti-Semitism and Christ’s death.

“The passion of Christ” has become synonymous with “the suffering of Christ,” and that comes from our Catholic spiritual roots where the word, “passion,” was derived from the Latin noun, “Passio,” which means “suffering.”

But in today’s world, an individual’s passion has a much broader meaning. Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “any emotion or feeling such as love, desire or anger, especially when of a powerful or compelling nature.” Therefore, we tend to use the word “passion” for any consuming interest and most often refer to a person’s passion as what she or he is passionate about.

That begs the questions: what was Jesus passionate about, and what was the relationship between his passion and his suffering?

Jesus was passionate about the Kingdom of God… He wanted his people to live a different life, a life under the reign of God where they would find love, peace and justice—with justice defined as a virtue whereby one respects the rights of all persons, living in harmony and equity with all.

Does that sound familiar? “Striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being” is part of our Baptismal Covenant. But the Kingdom of God is not limited to Episcopalians. It is a foundational concept in all of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people longed for the values of the Kingdom life, which they heard about in Scripture, but they misread it as being an earthly kingdom, one like the kingdom they knew under King David.

You see, during David’s reign, Israel experienced the greatest period of its history. The country was united, all twelve tribes were under one king; it was at its largest; it was powerful and thus its people were safe from their neighbors; a glorious temple was built by David’s son, Solomon, and this period was remembered not only as a time of power and glory, but also a time of love, peace and justice… and David was remembered as a just and righteous king.

It was through the lens of this romanticized memory that the Jewish people imagined the coming Kingdom of God. They looked for another David: a mighty political leader, not a simple “shepherd.” And so they did not recognize Jesus…
On that spring day in the year 30, two processions entered Jerusalem. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. One was a peasant procession and the other was an imperial procession.

From the east, Jesus rode a humble donkey down the Mount of Olives, which was associated with the arrival of the Messiah. He was accompanied by many of his followers: a rag-tag parade of the poor, the impure—the outcasts of society. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north. Jesus’ message was about the Kingdom of God, where love, peace and justice reign.

From the west, and entering on the opposite side of the city, Pontius Pilate entered on a magnificent horse. He was accompanied by his imperial cavalry in their leather armor, carrying weapons, banners and poles with golden eagles mounted on top. The message from this procession was all about power, oppression and violence.

These two processions embodied the central conflict that led to the execution of Jesus: it was a conflict of politics and theology.

Roman imperial power was related to Roman imperial theology. According to their theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. Their theology began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 to 14 BCE. His father was believed to be the god Apollo who conceived him in his mother, Atia. Inscriptions refer to him as “son of God,” “lord” and “savior,” one who had brought “peace on earth.” After his death, legend has it that he ascended into heaven to take his permanent place among the gods.

Augustus’ successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, who was emperor during the time of Jesus’ ministry. For God’s people, the Roman procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.

Everything about this day was planned. Rome sent in extra military force to make sure that order was maintained with the hundreds of pilgrims who poured into the holiest of cities on the holiest of days.

Jesus planned his entry as a deliberate challenge to Roman and temple authorities. He rode into the Holy City when pilgrims were expected to walk. He made arrangements for the tethered donkey to be waiting and scholars believe that that donkey was released with the password, “The Lord has need of him.”

Jesus’ disciples intentionally draped that donkey with their cloaks to make it more imperial. They intentionally carried branches of palm because that was the custom for the occasion. And they were intentionally greeted in Jerusalem by fellow disciples who were waiting at the city gates to join Jesus’ procession… and all of this was foretold in Scripture.
As we heard in this morning’s first reading, the prophet Zechariah told God’s people that a king was coming to Jerusalem “humble, and riding on a donkey… he will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.” (Zechariah 9:9-10).

How could Pilate and the temple authorities fail to take notice of Jesus’ demonstration and the disruption that would take place on the following day when he upset the tables and cleared the temple of moneychangers and their livestock?

Speaking of temple authorities, I saw them in an entirely different light this year. I have long thought of them as “the real bad guys.” And whenever there is a negative comment aimed at the Jews in Scripture I am quick to add the words, “authorities or leaders,” to place the focus on them rather than the Jewish people.

I do this for three reasons: first, I believe it to be true. Second, Jesus, his family and his disciples were all Jews and third, I am protective of the Jewish people because I am blessed with the love and friendship of several remarkable Jewish friends.

But recent events have forced me to reexamine my views of the temple authorities of Jesus’ time. It began last summer when I was in England during the riots that swept across much of that country. I remember watching the news and how the Brits struggled to understand why this was happening. Day by day the truth gradually unfolded.

Shortly after I returned, the Occupy Movement began and I was surprised by my response when they occupied Wall St. Having been a part of the Wall Street community for most of my adult life, I was incensed with these demonstrators and I pointed my finger at Washington believing that our broken economy was their fault: they were the ones asleep at the wheel when Wall St. was doing what it does best, developing innovative products.

And then it hit me: we are all a part of the problem. We are all part of the system. When I was on Wall St. I worked for two extraordinary companies that had vision and integrity. I also worked for two minor companies with whom I developed products that were clearly designed to generate commissions for brokers rather than wealth for investors. Did I say anything? I’m ashamed to say that I did not. Why? Because it would have been a downward career move and I justified my lack of courage by telling myself that, “hey, that’s the way it is.”

In my silence, I was complicit in corporate sins. With that in mind I looked again at the temple authorities, but with an open heart. They were placed in an awkward position by Rome and had to maintain a delicate balancing act. They needed to collaborate enough with Rome to keep them happy, but not so much as to anger the community. Their decisions were often difficult.
Given that, it’s easy to imagine a responsible official saying, as the high priest Caiaphas said in today’s Passion narrative, “It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).

The temple authorities held a lot of power over the people. Not only was the temple the center of the faith and the dwelling place of God, it was the center of the local government. Temple authorities collected taxes and they were the mediators of forgiveness though the sacrifices that took place—for a price. The temple also drew hundreds of pilgrims each year, all of whom contributed to the local economy and to the temple.

This was the Jerusalem that Jesus entered on Palm Sunday. It was an unjust world, a world that benefited the top 1% at the cost of everyone else. It was a world where there was no direct access to God by the people, no brotherly love, no justice, no hope…

Jesus’ passion was giving us a different vision of how we could live together. That vision is called the Kingdom of God and it’s a way of life in which we live under the reign of God in love, peace and justice. But that way of life was a threat to the politics and theology of the time, and so those who were in power used their power to put a stop to “this Jesus.”

As disciples of Christ, we are called to be his hands and feet in the world. We are called to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. That’s part of our covenant with God, the covenant we made at our baptism.

Throughout Lent we have focused on our individual responsibilities to serve God. Today’s lessons teach us that we also have a corporate responsibility as well. As leaders in our society, we need to seek justice in the work we do. As responsible citizens of a democracy we need to use our vote to represent our values. As members of this parish we need to use our gifts to help others.

The most effective way to extend Kingdom values to others is to find our passion. We need to find that thing that excites us, that energizes us to make a difference in the world. It might be visiting the sick or those in prison. It might be leading a scout troop, teaching or participating in a medical mission to the Third World. Whatever our heart calls us to do, we need to follow it, both individually and corporately. That’s what I believe God is calling us to do on this Passion Sunday.

Amen.