

Sacrifice

Question 1: Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is:

- (a) a thought-provoking piece of cinematic art
- (b) "the greatest evangelical [sic] tool in the 2000-year history of the church"¹
- (c) anti-Semitic
- (d) historically and biblically inaccurate
- (e) I don't care, it's worse than *The Patriot*.

Countless reviews, analyses, critiques, and damning indictments of Mel Gibson's *Passion* have already come and gone – another one is only ever going to be a small drop in a very large bucket. So why bother? Is there no such thing as just a movie anymore?

In this case, apparently not. Remember that *The Passion* is not a film you see for the sake of enjoyment, at least not if you happen to know the story. Like *Schindler's List* or *Once Were Warriors*, there is something else at work here. I am glad to have seen *The Passion* and I intend to see it again; but if asked "did you enjoy it?", I will have to answer firmly in the negative. I can think of few more gruelling ways to occupy two hours than watching this film. Which is not to say that it is poorly made. On the contrary, it is, on the whole, well-crafted and cleverly executed. But a self-consciously "realistic" depiction of Christ's suffering was never going to be *entertaining*, as it were. This is no *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

I heard a fitting description recently, that *The Passion* depicts "what Mel Gibson thinks about every Easter". Good thing we didn't end up with an Easter Bunny musical. It is an important observation, though – *The Passion* is a cinematic representation of both more, and less, than the biblical narrative(s) of Christ's suffering,

incorporating later devotional material and "other" material into Gibson's own gospel synopsis.² Even the fact that the screenplay is based on a synopsis constitutes a departure of a sort, or at least an authorial manipulation. As one commentator notes, "It was clearly important for the early church not to combine the four [gospels] into one. If they're combined together, it's always going to be the director who's doing that. That is not necessarily bad. It's just to recognize it's Mel Gibson's Jesus".³ As to the question of who Mel Gibson's Jesus is, and what relationship this Jesus bears to any other Jesus (i.e. John's, Paul's, Geering's) – that is a matter of some debate. One thing is certain though: this Jesus suffers more than any other artistic or cinematic Jesus to date.

As a catalogue of brutality, *The Passion* is unparalleled by any Hollywood blockbuster that I know of.⁴ It displays all of Gibson's usual penchant for gore (think *Braveheart*), and carries a restricted rating with good reason. This movie's great strength is still its unflinching eye – there are many avert-your-eyes moments as well as force-yourself-to-look moments.

Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that such "realism" is a particular mode of cinematic narration (and thereby a particular mode of interpretation), as consciously adopted as a revisionist, socialist, or feminist perspective on the Gospel. How many of us found *Saving Private Ryan*, hailed as the most "realistic" war movie in history, to be simply Steven Spielberg's paean to the glories of the American military? Like many Hollywood heroes, Gibson's Jesus undergoes a beating which no mere mortal could ever plausibly survive. The problem with this is that Christ is both fully

divine and an utterly "mere" mortal. The SuperChrist of *The Passion* is hyper-realistic – "too true to be true" – like Heathcliff, Mr. Darcy or Mr. Rochester. Perhaps, in Gibson's *verissimo* representation of Jesus, the lines are etched just a little too deep.

And yet, for someone with no prior knowledge of the Jesus story, *The Passion* must be thoroughly mystifying. Take the flashback to Christ's intervention on behalf of Mary Magdalene, for example. Gibson's understated approach to this scene works well: Jesus writes in the dust while blurry Jewish leaders drop their stones in defeat, out of focus yet still in the frame. But with no dialogue and in slow motion, it only works for those who already know why Jesus is writing in the sand. Otherwise it just looks like a weird family get-together: a crowd of surly uncles and one truculent niece.

Some of the supernatural elements are hard to fathom also – why does Satan (depicted in the guise of a semi-androgynous semi-albino woman) at one point carry a grotesquely deformed baby? This is perhaps a symbolic degradation of the image of the Madonna and Child, but the interpretation is uncertain at best. And when, at the moment of Jesus' death, this Satan-figure emits a howl, it is by no means obvious to a non-Christian viewer that it is a howl of despair rather than triumph.

On the other hand, the "Catholic stuff", in general, is done very well. The Stations of the Cross are all present and accounted for, forming an effective structure from which Gibson hangs the narrative. There is an embedded formalism at work as we move from station to station which gives *The Passion* a ritualistic, meditative atmosphere. Station six, in which Veronica wipes Jesus' face, is particularly well done; although I

must admit I couldn't help comparing the resultant shroud of Turin with Tom Hanks' smiley-face t-shirt from *Forrest Gump*.

Jim Caviezel (Jesus) delivers Jesus' last seven words from the cross in masterful fashion. The acting is excellent all round, in fact. Ivano Marescotti effectively realises Pilate as the wounded soul hounded by the knowledge of his own culpability; and Jarreth Merz (Simon of Cyrene) puts in a good turn as the onlooker in all of us. The best performances, though, are those of Caviezel and Maia Morgenstern (Mary). Their portrayal of twinned suffering and compassion is luminous and gut-wrenching.

Of course, *The Passion* is far from perfect. The editing is sloppy; the crowd scenes are unconvincing; and

the mostly impeccable soundtrack occasionally shades into overwrought pathos. But the major aesthetic problem is that it has no narrative arc: there is no rise and fall, only entropy. *The Passion* spirals

unrelentingly downwards through despair, humiliation and torture, to agony, both physical and spiritual, and finally to gruesome death. Which is, after all, pretty much what one would expect. True, there are moments of...if not levity then at least lightness – Christ the carpenter showing a finished table to his mother; Christ the teacher giving the Sermon on the Mount. But they are few and far between, and always in flashback mode. Watching them, we know that such points of rest cannot last long, that the camera must eventually cast its eye back to Jesus' suffering. The death of Christ presents no opportunities for light relief.

The life of Christ, however, provides just such an opportunity

– and the resurrection, when Gibson finally gets there, is depicted brilliantly. It is subtle, unexpected, minimalist; and strangely moving for all that. There is enough of a hint of promise without obscuring the darkness that is the film's main currency. *The Passion* does indeed give a glimpse of the risen Christ; but the implications of that are left to the viewer to decide.

In church on Easter Sunday, as I joined in the feeble singing and made small-talk during communion, I was reminded again of the Church's (and my own) failings and incompetencies at comprehending and representing the Easter narrative – indeed, the abiding incompleteness of any representation of Jesus. Despite

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our best efforts, Jesus remains impossible to pigeon-hole. In a way, the story of his death and resurrection tells itself – we just need to listen.

There are many things that one might take away from a movie such as this. For one thing, is it a useful evangelism tool? Maybe, maybe not. It certainly makes for great conversation fodder, and I know of no more vivid presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection. It could, on the other hand, be unhelpful if theologically misappropriated or taken as a substitute for a fuller (and indeed more accurate) presentation of the gospel and the gospel message. The book of Revelation, for example, has been known to provoke vivid nightmares and dangerous pre-occupations when

read without context by impressionable youngsters. Jesus on the cross, too, needs context. Without an awareness of sin, the crucified Christ becomes just another martyr – his death is sad, perhaps even tragic, but senseless all the same. We must always be making *sense* of Jesus' death, remembering that it is not only suffering but salvation also.

And at its heart, *The Passion* is about sacrifice. Despite its flaws, and they are many, the film is an incredibly powerful depiction of Jesus' loving offering of himself. That, in my opinion, is the most important thing for anyone to take away from it, believer or non-believer. Loving sacrificially, as Christ does, is an ideal patently lacking in our corporate-consumer culture. When the purpose of

existence is to get as much of everything as possible, why would anyone ever sacrifice anything? *There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* (Jn 15:13).

Endnotes

1. Gary Hearon, executive director, Dallas

Baptist Church, quoted in “The gospel according to Mel”, *The Dominion Post* (24 February 2004): B5.

2. See Margaret Mitchell, “Is the Passion Anti-Semitic?” in this issue.

3. Jeff Staley, faculty member of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Seattle University, quoted in Janet Tu, “‘Passion’: the Gospel according to Mel Gibson”, http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2001863907_gospels24m.html [accessed 10 March 2004]

4. To be fair, Gibson funded *The Passion* himself, so it is not exactly a “Hollywood” blockbuster.”

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