

Film review of Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of The Christ'
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Mel Gibson doesn't do reticence. The face of Christ is in your face. In the New Testament, the gospel writers narrate the crucifixion with admirable restraint and economy of words – what is surprising, in their accounts, is the very lack of gory detail.

Here, perhaps, we have the confluence of traditions of medieval Catholic piety, (in which elaborate devotions developed around Christ's wounds) and a postmodern fascination with close up, technicolour, unremitting, surround-sound, voyeuristic violence ('Saving Private Ryan').

Most who see this film will be shaken: even many hardened film critics felt hacked visually. I went in wondering whether I would come out willing to recommend the film. At the end, I was so stirred, I had to wait in silence as people slipped out around me and I was left with the cleaners. I was left with the thought: 'He did that for me' and it made me rethink my priorities. I remembered a challenge in Jürgen Moltmann's classic, *The Crucified God*: 'Christians who do not have the feeling that they must flee the crucified Christ have probably not yet understood him in a sufficiently radical way.'

In seeing only the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, we miss the human context and radical content of his teaching about the kingdom of God. There are some wonderful flash-backs: Jesus laughing with his mother about his carpentry mistakes; the power of 'love your enemies' in the sermon on the mount; Pilate calling for a bowl and then the washed hands turning out to be those of the disciples at the Last Supper. We would have benefited from more flash-backs and less flagellation.

Gibson has produced a foreign language film: maybe it should be in that category in the film awards... The Romans speak Latin (with 'church pronunciation') and the Jews, Aramaic: 'common Greek', also spoken generally in that period and the language of the New Testament, is missing. It was fascinating to hear the vernacular of Jesus being spoken: but Jesus, in agony from a beating of within an inch of his life, speaking to Pilate in grammatical Latin does sound odd. The subtitles reminded me of how this story is foreign to all of us. Too often Christians in the west have domesticated Jesus of Nazareth: we have made him too much one of us, - made him less strange. He comes to us here as a stranger who questions us.

Which brings us to the issue of anti-semitism. This devil is in the detail of the subliminal. Under pressure, Gibson rightly took the curse: 'his blood be on us and on our children' out of the subtitles; but in leaving it in the Aramaic soundtrack, he is leaving himself open to the questions of *the risen Stranger* of being lazy or disingenuous. Jesus' mission was an urgent renewal movement within first century Palestinian Judaism, in the context of a possible (and, as it turned out, eventual) catastrophic destruction by the Romans. I was waiting for line: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'

According to Luke 23:34, this probably refers to the Romans (some ancient manuscripts lack the evocative phrase). In the film, Jesus says it first to the Roman soldiers, and later he says it *again* to a leader of the Jews who is taunting him, as he hangs on the cross. This, I believe, is a significant hint; but it may be missed by many.

Here we see a tortured and executed dissident: the 'disappeared' of Argentina and Chile, of Sri Lanka and apartheid-era South Africa may be seen as foreshadowed in the Galilean. Here also, I believe, we are faced with the luminary and the liminal: the light of the world and the threshold of life. I was moved, but to where did it move me? I'll need the rest of my life to figure that out.

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