

"The Passion of the Christ" From files by Andrew Foster and Frank McClelland

On February 25, 2004, after months of hype and controversy the movie *"The Passion of the Christ"* was released publicly to North American movie houses. This film claims to present the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus Christ and to be the most accurate and impressive film version of Christ ever. It is noted for the very graphic, brutal representation of the suffering and agonies of Christ -hence it's 'R' rating for violence.

The movie has been welcomed, albeit cautiously by Pope John Paul II. He is reported to have said, "It is as it was." The reason for his caution is the controversy raging among the Jews that the film may well encourage a rise in anti-Semitism. He does not want to further harm the dialogue of Rome with Israel.

A near hysterical welcome has been given by many evangelicals. Billy Graham saw a preview, was moved to tears, and said it contained "a lifetime of sermons". He seems to have forgotten that salvation is by faith and not by sight, and that *"it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."* [I Corinthians 1.21]. Rick Warren, James Dobson and many others climbed on the bandwagon and described the film

as 'a wonderful tool of evangelism.' However, fundamental Christians, when looking at the supporters of the movie, may feel cause to reflect on what the film is all about. Also, when its release was delayed to Wednesday February 25 warning flags go up. That day is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten period so loved by the Roman Catholic Church.

Christians need discernment today. Far too many are stampeded into supporting causes that have serious questions as to their orthodoxy, Promise Keepers, Alpha Course, Rick Warren's 'Purpose Driven Life' to name but a few.

Now comes the *'Passion'* film. All of these have a substantial degree of truth in them, but there are troubling problems that cause earnest believers to question whether or not they should support them.

TWO MAIN CHARACTERS

In the *The Passion of Christ* there are two main personalities who guided the direction of the movie. From the production side is Mel Gibson. He is the prime mover of the project. It was his ambition and his \$25 million that brought it to fruition. His stamp is upon the whole production.

What do we know about Mel Gibson? He is an accomplished actor in his own right starring in the likes of the War of Independence epic, *'the Patriot'*. He is also a devoted Roman Catholic, but not just a nominal one. He belongs to a group that rejects the changes of Vatican II under Pope John XX 111, and supports the traditional Tridentine Mass. This places Gibson squarely in the camp of those who go back to the Council of Trent for authority. That Council was held, under Pope Pius V in 1570, and was a Roman Catholic reaction to try and undo the work of the Protestant Reformation.

The Creed of Pius IV which immediately preceded the Council of Trent speaks of the *"catholic faith, without which no one can be saved"* [Article 12]. The Council of Trent places a curse upon those who believe, as we do, in justification by faith in Christ alone. *"If any one shall say that the ungodly man is justified by faith only.....let him be accursed"* [Canon 9].

Mel Gibson is therefore, by his own desire, tied into the Council of Trent mentality, which does not auger well for his film.

Gibson is also a lover of detailed, gory, violent screen action. "Mel likes to put violence in his films." So said James Caviezel who played the part of Jesus in the production. The second major character is the aforesaid James Caviezel. Also an

accomplished actor he was born in Mount Vernon, Washington in 1968. Like Gibson he is also a devoutly religious Roman Catholic. Of Christ he is on record as saying, *"I love Him more than my wife and family."*

In order to play the part of Jesus, especially the crucifixion scene, he asked Gibson to arrange Mass for them on each day of the five week shooting of the crucifixion. He wanted to be "squeaky clean" for his performance. He told Gibson, "I think it is very important that we have mass every day - at least I need that to play *this guy*." Gibson arranged to have a priest on the set each day to accommodate this request and provide the 'sacrament.' Caviezel said, "I felt it was if I was going to play Him I needed (the sacrament) in me." It may not have been too effective in the quest to be "squeaky clean" because, when Caviezel was accidentally hit by a 'Roman, soldier during the flagellation he admitted mouthing "the F word!" "The mass, or eucharist, is not just another variation of the communion feast. The Anglican 31st article calls it a *"blasphemous fable and a dangerous deceit.* ...Caviezel likes to recount how, when filming a Sermon on the Mount sequence, he was struck by lightning. He made a joke of it.

SERIOUS QUESTIONS

The first obvious question is the matter of whether it is ever right to act the Lord Jesus Christ. There has been a gradation in Hollywood's thinking on this.

In the early days of filmmaking the idea of showing Christ was taboo. Then they introduced back shots of a white robed figure. Then distant front scenes were followed by close up facial shots. Now, in the *Passion* the cameras are looking deeply into 'His' face. Is that right?

The second commandment in Exodus 20:4-6 forbids the making of graven images of things heavenly or earthly as a worship tool. Surely if this applies to anything it applies to the Lord Jesus Christ?

The Church of Rome has long loved statues, icons, holy pictures of Christ. These we are told are an aid to worship. When people travel it is nice to have photographs of husband, wife and children to remind us of them when separated for a time on business or vacation.

But when at home with them the picture is of little value because we have the real person beside us. Christians do not need these earthly depictions of Christ to help us worship because we have the *real* Christ with us at *all* times. This film is an extension of the statue, holy picture syndrome.

Besides, there is a serious problem with these media because they, at best, can only present half a Christ. He is the God/Man. Any earthly representation of Christ, be it statue or actor, can only approximate His humanity, but they can never depict His deity. Hence their best efforts can only present half of Christ.

Furthermore, the *Passion* film focuses on His physical suffering but can never hope to portray the broken heart of Christ as He bore the burden of sin on the cross. That internal anguish was such that it issued forth in that awful cry, *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me."*

An artist may produce a beautiful painting of a flower or a scene but in reality it comes nowhere near the complexity, depth of colouring or beauty of the original. Never yet have we seen a painting or a photograph of the scenery and colouring of a magnificent Canadian fall. They are good but at best are pale imitations of the real. Likewise, no matter how graphic Gibson or Caviezel try to be their production will always fall far short of the Divine original.

THE UNREALITY OF IT ALL

That brings us to consider the unreality of the whole endeavour. The movie is presented on a flat screen and the images are reflected points of light. The lurid pictures in newspapers and magazines taken from the film are also unreal. That is not Christ, it is an actor! The blood is not real, it is a movie substitute. The wounds are not real, neither is the crown of thorns. The victim, Caviezel, is not hurting he is playacting. The real Jesus reserved his harshest words for *'hypocrites'* "or play actors, as the term properly means. Jesus warned that in the last days if any man should say *"I here is Christ, or there," believe it not, for there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; inasmuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect*" [Matthew 24:23]

But, says someone, there is little unscriptural about the *Passion* movie, it is merely a new medium for the utterance of the old message. Is that not good? A.W. Tozer, who died in 1963, answers this argument in his perceptive booklet on the *"Menace of the Religious Movie."* *It is a medium in itself wholly foreign to the Bible and altogether unauthorized therein. It is play acting - just that and nothing more. ...Playacting is bad in its essence ... It embodies a gross moral contradiction in that it calls a lie to the service of the truth.* " Hollywood has a difficulty in that it is running out of subject matter, hence venturing into subjects that in earlier days were forbidden.

THE MATTER OF AUTHORITY

The Bible, which is the source book of all Christian authority, does not go into too much detail about the sufferings of Christ. It reveals the facts but does not present them in a dramatic way to enflame the emotions.

One wonders, therefore, where Gibson and Caviezel got the gory details of the crucifixion? The answer is not hard to find. Apart from the Bible record they relied on the visions of two Roman Catholic nun-mystics, the Venerable Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824 and Mary of Agreda. The former was one of those who displayed the 'stigmata' - the wounds of Christ on *her* head, feet, hands and chest. Of her, Gibson said, "She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of." [New Yorker September 15, 2003] Again note the influence of Roman fantasy in the lives of the producers of this movie.

THE ROLE OF MARY

That brings us now to consider the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus. (By the way, the woman who depicted Mary Magdalene in the film is an Italian porn actress). In December 2003 Jim Caviezel, who plays Christ, arranged a private presentation of the unfinished version of this movie at "The Mother's Village" in Medjugorje, the Marian apparition site in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In an interview with a priest at that shrine he made the following comments: *The catharsis for me to play this role was through Medjugorje, through Gospa* (a term which means 'Our Lady' in the former Yugoslavia). Caviezel goes on, *"In preparation, I used all that Medjugorje taught me. Mel Gibson and I were going every day for Mass together."*

But that's not all. Caviezel said that *"Ivan Dragicevic* (a 'seer' from the Marian shrine at Medjugorje who claims that the Virgin Mary has appeared to him every day since 1981) *and his wife Lorraine gave me a piece of the true cross. I kept this on me all the time. They made a special pocket in my clothes for it. I also had relics of St. Padre Pio, St. Anthony of Padua, Ste. Maria Goretti, and St. Genesius, the patron saint of actors....Every day someone could see me with the rosary in my hand."*

He went on to say, *"This film is something that I believe was made by Mary for her Son. Because it was made by her, it will be attacked by the enemy."*

In the Roman Catholic 'Interim' newspaper (February 2004) John Henry Weston wrote that *"the role of Mary.... is beautifully portrayed. Parents will feel the intense pain of Mary as she watches in submission as her flesh and blood offers his flesh and blood for the salvation of the world."* "So the heresy of Mary as co-redemptrix with Christ surfaces in that comment.

FALSE PREMISE

The focus of the evangelical supporters of the film seems to be that if only the ungodly, the unsaved, could see the sufferings of Christ with the natural eye they would turn in droves to Christ. This is a fallacy. Sight is not necessary to faith as Peter indicated when he wrote, *"Whom having not seen, ye love: in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."* [1 Peter 1:9] The Scripture carefully records

that there were very few who witnessed up close the death agonies of Christ. The disciples, with the exception of John, had fled. The women watched *"afar off"* Indeed it is probable that the only 'close up' witnesses of His final agony were the two dying thieves, one destined for heaven and the other for hell.

Jesus suffered and died alone, family and friends being *"afar off"* Gibson upsets this divinely appointed circumstance by inviting the movie-going hordes to enter this precious, holy, sacred ground to be entertained - and not to forget to leave their money at the door! The whole idea of people responding positively to this film goes against what the Lord Himself taught. In Luke 16 He told of the rich man in hell who wanted the beggar Lazarus to go and speak to his five brothers and warn them to flee from the wrath of God.

In that parable Abraham said to the rich man, *"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them."* The rich man remonstrated that, *"Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead; they will repent."* Abraham's answer was clear, *"if they will not hear Moses and the prophet, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."* [Luke 16.19-31]

The same applies with the near-hysterical search for the remains of Noah's Ark a few years ago. Some evangelicals argued that if it was found what a "wonderful tool of evangelism it would be." But Christianity is a religion of *faith* not of sight. Salvation is the work of God, wrought by the Holy Spirit, Who applies the merits of Christ's sacrifice on the cross to sinners for the redemption of His people. *"The just shall live by faith"* was the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation. It still applies though many modern evangelicals who, if they have not already accepted a Roman-type salvation by works seem very close to it.

But someone argues that the film is emotionally moving. No doubt, but stop and think a moment. Every film is deliberately intended to affect the emotions of the viewers whether the movie is secular or religious. That is the whole point. Many have left purely secular movies in tears because they were touched, but that has little to do with the salvation of the soul.

The main message of the One they are trying to portray is *"Believe"*. The main means is the Word of God. Paul, under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reminds us that *"Faith cometh by hearing* (not seeing), *and hearing by the word of God."* [Romans 10.17]

THE REACTION

Many undiscerning evangelicals have welcomed the *Passion of the Christ* as a great tool of evangelism to reach the unconverted. Churches have block-booked cinemas and given out tickets free. How will the ungodly react? The answer to that question can be gauged by the response from ungodly (by their own admission) media reviewers. The *Toronto Star* had a banner headline, "A dark and bloody spectacle". Here are some quotes from Geoff Pevere's review. He rates the film at a lowly 'one star.'

"Every inch of Jesus' earthly flesh is ripped in this movie in full surround sound, and every drop of blood spilled with digital realism."

"You're in for one of the most unremittingly cruel movie experiences this side of the (considerably less pious and certainly more fun) remake of *The Texas Chainsaw massacre*."

"A spectacle of pure, concentrated brutality."

"What graphic sex is to the use of the body in hardcore porn, graphic violence is to the destruction of the body of Christ in the *Passion*."

Mel Gibson is "a block-buster-baptized brute ... devising new ways in which to ratchet up his Saviour's excruciation."

The *Boston Globe* reported the film is "more obsessed with capturing every holy drop of martyr's blood and sacred gobblet of flesh than with any message of Christian love. . . any parent- no matter how devout and well-intentioned - who takes a child to this movie is guilty of abuse."

Roger Ebert reports, "This is the most violent film I have ever seen."

This film is a return to Rome's body flagellation practice to remove sin. Martin Luther protested against it. Shame on the modern evangelicals who support and promote it.

