

April 2004

Dear Parish Family,

The Church Latin word, *passio*, meaning suffering, has come over into English as the word, *passion*. The word's range of meaning in modern English usage includes strong emotion and suffering, especially the suffering of Christ. The Passion of Christ is the suffering of Christ. The movie by Mel Gibson depicts Christ's suffering graphically. For this he has been greatly criticized. It is the extent of the violence that is my only criticism, but not a strong criticism. Many movies with violent themes and scenes have not received the criticism this film has. This fact is deeply ironic.

The film is a masterful production. The purported anti-Semitism must be read into Gibson's rendition of the passion story, for we do not believe that anti-Semitism is actually there. It is tempting to accuse Mr. Gibson of anti-Semitism on the basis of his father's fringe opinions. To be fair, we must look closely at the artist's work itself.

The scene where the chief priests watch Christ being scourged may be interpreted as anti-Semitic. None of the Gospels record their presence at the scourging. The scourging is mentioned in one sentence. We have available to us historical information on the Roman practice of scourging "Roman scourging was so severe that victims often died under it. For one charged, as Jesus was, with sedition, it would have been merciless." (Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 1, p. 747) Though the film could have shown less of the scourging, historical record does attest to its violence. If this scene is anti-Semitic, the Gospels are anti-Semitic. Matthew, a Jew himself, tells us that the priests were present at the crucifixion where they mocked Jesus. In Matthew Jesus is very critical of the Jewish leadership. Matthew also tells the story of the troubled dreams of Pilate's wife and of Pilate's belief in Jesus' innocence. He records the response of the people, "His blood be on us and our children." to Pilate's words, "I am innocent of this man's blood; See to it yourselves" (Matthew 27:24) If the movie is anti-Semitic, then so is the Bible.

The crowd in the movie was viewed by some as anti-Semitic. The crowd, or mob, has a definite function in the Passion accounts of the Gospels as a pawn of the religious leadership. In the Gospels, the crowd calls for Jesus' death, but not all the people of Jerusalem are involved in that mob action. Gibson's use of the crowd is biblically based.

Pilate is not a sympathetic figure. Any judge, who has an innocent man killed for whatever reason, is despicable. The Roman soldiers are very brutal. Here again Gibson is expanding the biblical description of events. Pastor Mike did not take these expansions to be anti-Italian.

Anti-Semitism is a grievous thing. The New Testament records tensions between Christians and Jews. At that time, the conflict was largely an intra-Jewish conflict between Jews who accepted Christ and those who did not. But, eventually Gentile Christians were involved in the conflict, leading to the periodic, often quite brutal, suppression of the Jewish community. Luther himself recommended harsh measures against Jews.

Modern anti-Semitism is in part derived from the Medieval Christian contempt shown to the Jewish community. But, its modern form has been significantly different in its grotesque racial and conspiracy theories, which fed the totalitarian fantasies of the Nazi movement. (See Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*). Christians acquiesced to the mistreatment and extermination of Jews, but it was thoroughgoing pagans who perpetrated the slaughter. We should take warning that anyone could be complicitous in such acts. The late Twentieth Century is replete with genocides — Iraq, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Burundi. No one can ever state confidently, "It could not happen here." Christians must be intentional in our defense of vulnerable people. Democratic institutions must be protected to avert totalitarian threats.

Several other examples from the movie are given in various reviews to lend credence to the charge of anti-Semitism. Judas grubs for the blood money thrown on the floor — supposedly indicating Jewish greed. But, such greed is not particularly Jewish but human. Greed is an all too universal human sin. This criticism seems to be more of a read into the film than Gibson's intention. Another example is of Satan walking among the crowd as if his presence points to Jewish guilt for the crucifixion. The crowd was largely Jewish because of the historical fact that these events took place in Jerusalem — a Jewish town. Satan's presence points to his involvement in the events, not to sinister anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism would blame all Jews in time and place for the death of Christ. The film simply does not do this. In Luke, Satan fails in his temptation of Jesus before the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Then, Luke states, "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." (Luke 4:13) That opportune time came much later in the story when the devil entered Judas. (Luke 22:3) Gibson gives Satan visibility, probably to show in a visual, cinematic way that the devil was at work in the death of Christ.

Jesus condemns the city to judgment for his coming innocent death — a theme greatly highlighted in Luke. Jesus' words are in line with ancient prophetic condemnations of the city by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. One may ask, why is everyone punished for the sin of the few? In fact, the destruction of Jerusalem came a generation later in 70 A.D. Within Jewish prophecy, punishment is meted out to the whole nation, not just a few. Jesus' announcement of punishment is consonant with Old Testament prophecy concerning sin and the punishment of the nation. Jews are not more sinful. Gentiles are sinners too. We are all sinners, who will be judged by God, if we do not repent. We are all guilty of the death of Christ as the great hymn, "Ah, holy Jesus" (LBW, 123) expresses so well.

Like the Scriptures, the movie gives an account of the cost of universal human sin — the sin of Jews and Gentiles — whose solution is the great sacrifice of Christ. God through His Son, Jesus Christ, pays the price of human sin. The movie confronts us with our sin and the sacrifice that undoes the consequences of sin for those who repent. Forgiveness is made possible by the cross of Christ. What we can not do by our own efforts is done through the power of the Crucified One, raised from the dead.

Early in the film in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ crushes the head of the serpent, which represents Satan. This scene is not literally in the account of Gethsemane in the Gospels. But, it gives a visual picture of the fulfillment of the Word of God regarding Christ's defeat of Satan found in Genesis, "I will put enmity between you (the serpent) and the woman and between your offspring and hers (Christ), he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:14)

Mr. Gibson adds to the film but does not distort the accounts of Christ's passion in the Gospels. His additions point to the Christian confession of the meaning of Christ's death. In line with other producers of movies on biblical themes, he adds his own touches. They preserve the integrity of the Gospel accounts. Each Gospel tells the story of Christ's death somewhat differently. Gibson draws from them and adds his own artistic invention in powerful visual symbols.

We recommend the movie to you and urge you to read again the Gospel accounts. The movie can never replace the biblical text. Thus far the word is that the movie spoke powerfully to members of the congregation. Generally speaking, Pastor Mandy's observation is true, "Those who like the book (the Bible) will like the movie."

In Christ,

Pastor Mike & Pastor Mandy