

23/2/2014. *Film review: The Passion of the Christ*

Films based on Bible stories are back in fashion at our cinemas. The most reverent was a decade ago, however, Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. Gibson is a Christian in the Roman Catholic tradition and remains one of Hollywood's biggest stars. But *Passion* was made with a notable absence of support from the mainstream film industry. Hollywood is aggressively secular and its products have done much to elevate man and deny God, in secular films and occult horror films. *The Passion of the Christ* focuses on the suffering of Jesus Christ in the hours before and at his crucifixion. It is so graphic, particularly the whipping, that it has been commended among connoisseurs of cinematic gore. How should the church receive it?

First, the church should restrict itself to theological rather than artistic scrutiny. That is its business, and there is already too much disunity among Christians. It is good to see a film in mainstream cinemas that takes the gospel tale reverently; too many films have done the opposite. (I would not be Martin Scorsese or Jean-Luc Godard for all the world.) If Mel Gibson chooses to concentrate on a few hours of Jesus' life with little explanatory context beyond one of the prophetic 'suffering servant' verses from Isaiah then that is up to him. The film is no theology lecture, but it was never meant to be. Dramatically, it was all in one gear, which I found difficult because my generation prefers understatement, leaving more for the imagination, to bludgeoning. But the film will speak to a younger generation that desperately needs to know Jesus. No unbeliever should grumble about the graphic portrayal of suffering: this actually happened. Certainly it is not more graphic than a huge amount of violence put out by the film industry, which the world flocks to see. (Some has unfortunately involved Gibson, before and since *The Passion*.) Christians who buy their meat packaged in supermarkets need reminding that sacrifice is a messy business (read Leviticus!)

Within Western churches the film can act a corrective to docetism, the view that Jesus was not fully human though fully divine. We see Messiah suffering profoundly. Docetism was behind the grumbling at Dorothy L. Sayers' more rounded portrayal of Christ at the time of World War II (her radio drama *The Man Born To Be King*), and it never wholly went away. But I think that God had more in mind than correcting the Western church. Muslims, who normally avoid anything Christian, flocked to the film, because they had been told that it portrayed the Jewish authorities in a negative light. (Not more so than the gospels, and Gibson, who unfortunately spoke of Jews with hate when drunk in 2006, did not provide English subtitles for the most controversial line, spoken in the film's Aramaic: Matthew 27:25.) What Muslims see for two full hours is Jesus – whom they revere as a prophet – graphically suffering and dying for them on the cross, a death that the Quran explicitly denies.

Some evangelicals have grumbled that the film is based more on the 200-year-old visions of Roman Catholic Sister Anna Katarina Emmerich than on gospel accounts. Apart from a little dramatic license (the sundering of the Temple rather than the curtain within it), there was no serious theological deviation from the gospel, and in a two-hour film there has to be some fleshing-out of the scriptural accounts. In relation to this film, Emmerich should be seen simply as a scriptwriter. Neither do I object to the making of a film that portrays Jesus – we are not to 'make and worship images' and I believe that 'make' and 'worship' go together in this command. We do not worship the film or its portrayal of Christ; we watch it.

Let me finish with some facts about the making of the film. Mel Gibson showed his own hands nailing Jesus down, explaining, "It was me that put him on the cross. It was [for] my sins." The makers were twice hit by lightning during filming in October 2003, including a strike on Jim Caviezel who played Jesus, yet Caviezel was unhurt and nobody suffered more than superficial burns. Was God directing attention toward this project?

POSTSCRIPT. According to the Internet Movie DataBase <www.imdb.com> this film had more pre-ticket sales than any previous film in history; it was the highest-grossing R-rated film (Restricted, because of the violence) in US box office history; it was the highest grossing foreign language film and/or subtitled film in US box office history; and it has been the highest grossing religious film in worldwide box office yet.