

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FILM *THE PASSION* BY MEL GIBSON

Cal Thomas of Tribune Media Services speaking on this film has said,

‘As one who has seen virtually every modern biblical epic —from Cecil B. DeMille's : “The Ten Commandments” to the two-part “Jesus” ministries on CBS three years ago—I can say “The Passion” is the most beautiful, profound, accurate, disturbing, realistic and bloody depiction of this well-known story that has ever been filmed.

‘Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus with tender understatement, may be the best “Jesus” ever (not counting the original). To those in the Jewish community who worry that the film, which is scheduled for release next Easter season, might contain anti-Semitic elements, or encourage people to persecute Jews, fear not. The film does not indict Jews for the death of Jesus. It is faithful to the New Testament account. Also, Gibson, a devout Roman Catholic, does not elevate Mary, Jesus' mother, beyond what Scripture says of her, which will broaden the film's appeal to Protestants.’

Undoubtedly this highly commends the film, and many will want to see it, as they have seen similar films in the past. My wish is not to deter any from seeing it, but I would like to share the following thoughts.

No film can actually depict what once happened. An actor cannot communicate what was said, what happened. He/she can only *act* it. Certainly acting it gives some of the idea of it, but the *reality* of the events is absent from the depiction. Like any picture that is painted or shown on film the depiction is the idea of its script-writer, and no one is critical of the writer for that. In most cases this does not matter because one human person depicting another human person can be very close to the mark, both being humans. In the case of Jesus, he, too, was a man, but at the same time a man such as there has never been the like. We do not even mean that being the Son of God he was beyond being what is a man. No: we mean that he lived a sinless life, he had no guilt, he was capable of feeling for others in love beyond what others can feel. He was truly a man, and beyond what any human person has ever been. In that sense he was more human than any other who has lived.

When then it comes to his passion and death he is in action, but not acting a part. He had told his disciples on three occasions that he was to go to Jerusalem, be betrayed at the hands of wicked men, be crucified and rise again the third day. When that happened his apprehension, judgement, suffering from scourging, and the crucifixion were undoubtedly most painful. Even so his most dreadful pain began in Gethsemane when he told his disciples, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, *even unto death*’. This meant he was literally dying of sorrow. Even so he did not die. From that point onwards he was operating by the help of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:14). The very way, in essence, in which he did all things was the way of suffering love. In history there are many occasions in which men and women have suffered more physically than what he suffered. Not only have others been scourged and crucified, but the torture of spies and other prisoners has been more painful and longer drawn out. In his whole being Jesus has suffered more than these others, in that ‘he bore our sins in his own body on the tree’, and ‘he who knew no sin was made sin for us,’ as ‘he suffered the just for the unjust’ when God ‘laid upon him the iniquity of us all’. In being ‘the propitiation for our sins’ he bore the wrath of God upon all evil. The physical side of his crucifixion, painful as it was, was very minor in comparison with his sin-bearing.

What concerns me is that we may think that an actor can depict this kind of suffering for sin, for it was unique to him, by nature of the case. None who has sinned can suffer in that manner. He cannot, for example have that look of love in his eyes which Jesus had for those who were crucifying him. That person cannot really cry to the Father as Christ did, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!' He cannot assure a criminal. 'This day shall you be with me in Paradise.' and none but he can cry, 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' None can never cry the cry of thirst as Jesus cried it when his spiritual waters were at the point of depletion, having been used in his spiritual struggle. No man can communicate the victory of 'It is finished!' nor truly convey the utter trust of the Son as he says, 'Father! Into thy hands I commit my spirit'.

Only when this action of the cross pierces to the heart can a person really comprehend the real meaning of the death on the cross. If one sees the passion, the suffering and the agony of the cross to be terrible—even very terrible—then he is likely to be moved deeply and believe that Christ had to suffer such terrible physical anguish for him/her in order to save human beings. That is not the case. The Gospels give us accounts of his death not just to move us to emotional sympathy, but to tell us what he told the disciples, '. . . this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'.

I have not seen the film and so I do not know what teaching regarding the forgiveness of sins is given in it. I remember my mother telling me of one of my brothers who, as a young boy, saw a film on the Cross and he came home weeping. 'Mum!' he cried, 'I will never sin again because of what Jesus did on that cross!'

My mother was deeply moved, but my brother as a youth and an adult never went near a church. I draw no conclusions from that but sympathy for excruciating pain is one thing and seeing the cross as God's true way of liberating us from sin and its guilt is another thing altogether. Many have criticised the Father for sending His Son to the cross, but they have not understood that 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me', as also the Father 'withheld not His Son but offered him up for us all.'

I cannot number the times I have preached the message of the cross from the Scriptures, as did the apostles, and have countless others, but one has not acted the cross nor drawn attention to the physical pain alone. It is 'the word of the cross' which the Holy Spirit takes up and conveys to the hearts and minds of hearers so that they comprehend the love of the Father and the Son in that most powerful of all acts in history.

Geoffrey Bingham, Kingswood, Australia August 2003.