

ON THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

When one of my left leaning friends asked me today (4/8/04) if I had seen Gibson's "Passion", I replied that I had seen it for the THIRD time yesterday. He looked at me aghast and "unbelieving." Didn't I recoil from the anti- Semitism? Didn't I emotionally upchuck at the violence, the sadism with its sexual implication, the gore, the bloody excess? Didn't I, with all my puritanical tendencies, rebel against what the Frank Rice crowd called the inherent pornography in the film? With all my fancy education and clinical experience, why didn't I see what the intellectual elite sees? How could I sit through it even once, let alone, three times?

I looked at him, equally and oppositely aghast. As a seasoned and almost hoary clinical psychologist, I am very aware of the clinical test called the " Rorschach" by which the tested subject projects onto a series of "ink blots" whatever the blots evoke in him- - - but coming from within his own psyche. Similarly, two people viewing the Passion can obviously " see" different meanings.

As a chap very proud of his Jewish heritage and extremely sensitive to the obscenity of anti-Semitism (or anti-Catholicism or racism or any bigotry) I found the heroes of the film to be Jews. The mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen, John, Peter (with a very hooked nose), the brave Veronica, likewise with a hooked nose, the courageous, dissenting members of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea, the unbelievable Simon of Cyrene. And most of all, the central figure Himself, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. All were Jews and were presented as persons of honor and integrity.

21

The Romans, on the other hand, were presented almost without merit. They are shown as near scum. Brutes. Real sadists. Below the primitive. Only once or twice is there even a hint of humanity in them. The Consul is shown to be weak and politically ambitious, ready to sacrifice anything for his career, even the respect of his wife.

Knowing the truth but fearing its impact on his future, he jettisons whatever conscience he still has out of personal greed and fear. If anything the film is anti-Roman. My reaction to the Romans was one teeming with revulsion and disgust.

Logic 101 allows me, however, to view with disgust a few jealous Jews like Caiphas and Annas. Simply because I share a common blood line with them in some mysterious manner, does not mean that I must be blind to patent evil. Jews or not, I see them as evil, at least I see their behavior as evil. When John Taliban Walker with whom I share a common American background, disgraced his country by treason in Afghanistan, I reacted with disgust and anger. In no way does this reflect on the American people whom I respect and admire.

Similarly, it would take a great deal of mental manipulation to conclude that Gibson, by highlighting the gross planning of a few jealous and possibly frightened Jews, stigmatized our people as "Christ killers." This is even ludicrous in the light of the often repeated theme that Jesus was crucified, not even by vicious Romans but by OUR sins. Gibson almost shouts out that HE leads the list. Indeed, the dramatic opening frame quotes the Bible asserting that the Redeemer (Jesus) was wounded by ALL of us. And, further, that He heals all of us.

Bill Donohue of the Catholic Defense League rightly notes (a la the Rorschach notion) that if one goes into the movie a bigot, he comes out a bigot. What I see, is not necessarily there. A good chunk of what any of us experiences in this film (obviously not all of it) is a projection - - and through our own personal filters. I

think Pure objectivity is rare, as I see reality after my 83 years of living. Epistemic diversity is inherent in reality. With my devoted love both of Catholicism (which brands anti-Semitism a sin) and of Judaism, I found nothing anti-semitic in the Passion of the Christ. Should some bigot brand us Jews, Christ killers, after seeing this film, I conclude that he could do the same thing after hearing Shirley Temple sing THE GOOD SHIP LOLLYPOP on the Mount of Olives.

There is a kind of frenetic insistence that the film is so violent as to be disgusting, and, unbelievably they further insist, pornographic. The claim of the irreligious left is that, for example, the scourging scene is unnecessary and possibly un-Scriptural. They trot out the usual critics, including the old standbys, ex-priests John Crosson and James Carroll. The lock step is almost funny when one considers that there was little outcry about the body halvings, decapitations and un-handings of the Gladiator or the violence of Schindler's List or Saving Private Ryan or Pulp Fiction or Kill Bill. There was no outcry about The Dreamers and its ugly theme of Incest. There was no outcry when Hollywood produced a movie deeply insulting to Christian sensitivities by portraying Jesus as having libidinous fantasies toward Mary Magdelene. Artistic freedom was offered as justification and ,besides, we can, they said, simply not go to the movie. But with the PASSION! What is the REAL agenda behind so much criticism when the viewing public (at least 20 million) are moved and touched beyond anything "movies" have presented up this time?

Have scholarly egos been bruised in realizing that all their books and articles put together cannot compare to the influence Gibson's film will have all over the World? Or that the film will have unbelievable evangelization possibilities? Or is there something more sinister? Are the criticisms attacks on the Gospels themselves? Gibson thankfully has remained faithful to the Gospel texts. If this is unacceptable behaviour then we are

indeed in trouble. Or are we seeing the Caught-by-surprise Secularists who had assumed that Christianity (towards which many have a near vitriolic hatred) is not dead after all?

Incidentally, from an historical stance, do these critics have any idea what was involved in a Roman scourging? Do they know that the Romans employed a flagellum consisting of leather thongs with sharpened metal points, the effect of which could only be what the film depicts? (Cf KD Whitehead in the Catalyst,2/4/04). The Romans WERE brutal. Or do the critics prefer to , in effect, deny the historic facts?

It has been rumored that Pope John Paul, after viewing the film, remarked, in parsimonious language, that "It is as it was." Many in the Vatican (including Ratzinger) see an abundance of symbols, in the film, which only the competent eye can fully see. Vittorio Messori, who was the only journalist to publish a book length interview with the Pope, sees the film as of VERY high technical quality so much so that previous films on Jesus might seem reduced to poor and archaic relatives. He delights in the

**and Gibson's
haristic aspect,
- - - the**

**acceptance of the Gospels as precise chronicles
rejection of scriptural de-mythicization. The Euc
the solid Marian devotion - - -the Transubstantion
Catholic tones are joys to him.**

**Good Friday
to experience
that he focused
roughly that we
ized; we are not
ample. The
th) which is
nting, canned
fake it ! fake it!**

**Cardinal Egan in his Three Hours' Reflections on
(2004) noted that the film allowed many viewers
Jesus' Passion as "never before." Gibson claims
on the brutality, for example, to shock us so thor
can see the Truth! Many of us like life to be sanit
capable of " too much truth..." See an obvious ex
undertaking profession tries to mask a truth (dea
unnerving to many - - - so use cosmetics, soft ligh
hymnal music, mechanical verbal patterns - - - t**

J.S Kennedy, Anglican priest, wrote in his classic poem, “When Jesus came to Birmingham”, “....men had grown more tender and would not give him pain.....they only just walked down the street and left Him in the Rain.....” In effect, don’t give me the REAL details. Pretty it up. Then I can walk away! Give me Jesus patting kids on the head and forgiving sinners. Tell me that God understands and loves me. Keep it “nice.” But don’t upset me with historical brutality and the need for tough, personal reform and sacrifice. Give me pictures of Him preaching social reform and ranting against gender discrimination, preferably as a sun tanned Californian Jesus, looking very New Age. Tell me that God loves me and my personal sacrifice is unnecessary. Make- life-nice- and-easy-for- me.

This type of modern narcissism conflicts with real Christianity – Dorothy Day liked to put reality this way: “God is a harsh and dangerous love.” Our critics, apparently, simply do not comprehend.

On the other hand, Gibson gives it to me “ right in the face” - -the way it really is! This masterpiece is obviously a “more-than-film” experience. For Gibson, it is a Mass. Messori claims that if the mind does NOT understand, so much the better. What matters is that the heart understands. The way he has the whole screen filled with these powerful images recalls an almost Michaelangelo effect. One doesn’t even need subtitles after a while - - - there are no distractions as we enter the terrible and marvelous scenes which are sufficient to themselves.

This is really not a film. It is an experience, an encounter. Lawyer and Deacon Keith Fournier reports that besides being a masterpiece of art and film making, the PASSION evoked more deep reflection and sorrow and emotional reaction than anything since his marriage, the birth of his children and ordination. He says that he will NEVER be the same. I feel the same way. My

Rosaries and Stations of the Cross are deeply colored by the constant images I carry from the PASSION! I see Him suffer such torture for me. It has become more personal for me than ever.

There is a section on Simon of Cyrene which really speaks to the human reluctance to carry our individual cross and to the deep need of many of us for a deeper relationship with Jesus. They, the Lord and the Cyrenean, carry the cross together and intertwine their arms and part on Golgotha wherein Simon has a "look" of longing for that deep intimacy with the Master.

Even with Judas! Jesus never takes His eyes off the Traitor even When the betrayer runs away. Can we miss the message? Even when we betray Him and run away never does He leave us.

An open heart can "sense" the Price paid by Jesus to set us free. But perhaps, a graphic and violent portrayal, difficult as it is to watch, is the shocking way for us realize how much He loves us. Gibson is, I think, practicing what the psychologist might call "tough love."

When I was studying graduate Psychology at NYU, my mentors hammered me to learn "scientific" writing, i.e. KEEP IT SHORT. I did and do fail miserably at "leaving most in the inkwell", but evidently, Gibson learned the principle well. His earth shaking film or experience is tightly focused on a specific period in the life of Jesus. Obviously, over the centuries, thousands have written of the Savior of Mankind. One can pick and choose what facet one likes. Gibson, with acute psychological insight, picked the "central" point of salvation - - - the death and passion of the Lord.

7

Unlike many critics, Catholics or not, I think The Passion should be seen by as many people as possible - - - since its message is love and forgiveness. In spite of the dismay of my liberal/leftist friend, I am intending to see the PASSION a fourth time! I wish he would come with me. Then, at least, he would have some validity to his criticism!