

# Reflections on the Passion

## David Starling

*Baptist pastor and historian, David Starling, offers his 'diary notes' on the Gibson movie.*

### The violence

As everyone had warned me, it was a violent film - much more violent than I'm used to watching at the movies. Parts of the film I just couldn't watch. In other parts, I had to keep reminding myself that this was a film, not the real thing, that the actor was just an actor and the blood was just make-up. Nevertheless, the fact that I could cope with watching as much of it as I could made me wonder whether I've seen more screen violence than is good for me over the years - enough to desensitise me even to such a graphic portrayal of the torture and and killing of Jesus himself.

At the same time, I'm glad that our society is being reminded (and forcefully reminded) that Jesus was not a harmless, inoffensive religious teacher who came to earth to spread tolerance and understanding, but a deeply divisive and controversial figure who inspired passionate hatred and who came to earth to die. I was reminded of the words of Jesus in Luke 12, and how the shadow of the cross hung over his whole life:

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division....” (Luke 12:49-51)

And it was good for me myself to be reminded that the Cross was not just an abstract concept but a real and bloody execution; it was good to be reminded of the hatred and evil that motivated it; and it was good to be forced to think again about what motivated Jesus to endure it.

### Finding meaning

I think the reviewers were right that there was a big risk that for some viewers—especially for people who didn't already know the meaning of the cross—the film ran the risk of falling over the edge into

meaningless violence, with everything else in the film being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the images of whipping and beating and crucifixion.

I was glad to see the attempts that Mel Gibson had made to give us some clues - eg. the verse from Isaiah 53 that flashed up (all too briefly) on the screen at the start, Jesus' prayer to his Father in the garden, and some of the flashbacks where Jesus talked to his disciples about his coming death.

Still, I suspect that the film made it much easier to see that Jesus was killed by his enemies than that he laid down his life for his sheep, or that he died by his Father's will, absorbing the wrath of God for our salvation.

## Images and Words

The film also made me reflect on both the power and the limitations and dangers of images. I don't think that making a movie about Jesus is in itself a violation of the second commandment - this side of the incarnation we know that God has made himself tangible and visible on earth as a man, and there is nothing in the New Testament that would suggest that it's wrong to represent the human figure of Jesus visually. In fact, I suspect that to ban all images of Jesus could run the risk of taking away from his full humanity.

But watching the film made me reflect on the weaknesses and limitations and dangers of trying to tell the story of the crucifixion in a visual medium like a film. Visual images have a certain, obvious power. They can arrest our attention, mesmerise us, implant themselves in our imaginations, make us feel overwhelmed and angry and tearful and physically sick. But they are also heavily dependent on context and on words (either spoken or written or remembered in our minds) if they are to convey much meaning.

I suspect there is a bias in any visual medium toward showing us the visible surface of things, and not the invisible things within. So in this film, for example, it was much easier to see the visible agony of Jesus' physical sufferings than the spiritual agony within. Watching the film made me very glad that what I feed on day by day is not endless reruns of the movie (or endless "re-presentations" of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass) but the words of the Bible.

I'm also glad that God has motivated people over the years to translate the Bible into my own language. Making the film in Aramaic and Latin was an interesting idea (and a brave one!) but it had the effect of sending me home not with words of Jesus ringing in my ears, but instead with images of a bloody-faced actor. It was a bit like being transported back for a night into the stained glass and statues and passion plays and unintelligible Latin masses of medieval religion.

## Jesus' Mother and Jesus' Father

That seemed to me to be especially the case with the film's portrayal of Jesus' mother Mary. Mary is certainly present in the gospels' accounts of the crucifixion, and it's true that the prophecy in Luke 2 speaks to Mary about the cross as 'a sword that will pierce [her] own soul also'. But the film seemed to me to go far beyond the gospels in the amount of focus that it placed on Mary - to the extent that the story-line of the film almost seemed to be constructed as an interweaving between Mary's story and Jesus'. Not only that - the way that Mary was represented visually (serene, beautiful, compassionate) and spoken to as 'Mother' by Jesus and all the disciples, prayed to for forgiveness by Peter - was a big step beyond the very human figure of the gospels toward the Holy Mother of Catholic tradition.

As I watched the film, it seemed to me as if the interplay between Jesus and his mother (whom we could see) was the main meaning of the story - even more important than the interplay between Jesus and his Father (whom we couldn't see). This aspect of the film reached its disturbing climax when Jesus cries out to his Father "Why have you forsaken me?", and the camera takes us immediately to a shot of his mother (who hasn't forsaken him??) at the foot of the cross.

I can see why a visual presentation of the crucifixion, with agonising images of the crucified Jesus and serene and compassionate images of Mary his mother could very easily produce the kind of religion that shrinks back from the (invisible, unknowable, angry Father) and runs instead to the arms of the (visible, compassionate, approachable) Mother of Jesus.

In the end it is the words of the Bible, not the images of films and statues and stained glass, that take me to the very heart of the gospel - the fact that I have a Father in heaven who loves me and has adopted me as his child, and who bore all the pain of the death of his own Son to purchase me and to forgive me and to assure me of his love:

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

*"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

*"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

## Forgiveness

Having said that, as someone who knows those things, there was still great benefit in being reminded so forcefully of the agony that Christ suffered so that I could be forgiven. Even the physical sufferings of the cross and what preceded it are enough to remind me that my forgiveness was not cheap. My relationship with God has been purchased with precious blood and with great suffering.

May God help me to remember that, when I minimise the sins I'm tempted to commit, and when I think of sacrifices that I think are too big for me to make in following Jesus.