

“The Passion of the Christ –

A Review of the Movie by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)”

A worthwhile Lenten prayer would be a re-viewing or viewing, for the first time, of the movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” by Mel Gibson. Video and DVD copies are available in our Parish Library, as well as any video rental store. The movie provides a powerful opportunity to reflect upon Christ’s suffering and death and can create a space in our lives in which we can better reflect upon Christ’s sacrificial gift of Himself to us.

Also this Tuesday, March 15th, at 7 PM Rabbi Mel Libman and I will share our perspectives on the movie. Everyone is invited to attend this Inter-faith event. It would be very helpful for you to have seen the movie in preparation for Tuesday’s presentation.

I have included the USCCB review of the movie as a help and preparation for Tuesday:

“The Passion of the Christ” (Newmarket) is an uncompromising interpretive dramatization of the final 12 hours of Jesus’ earthly life. Unflinching in its brutality and penetrating in its iconography of God’s supreme love for humanity, the film will mean different things to people of diverse backgrounds. Co-writer, producer and director Mel Gibson has undoubtedly created one of the most anticipated and controversial films of recent times.

Like other films on Christ’s life, “The Passion” does not simply translate a single Gospel narrative onto the screen. Rather it is a composite of the Passion narratives in the four Gospels embroidered with non-scriptural traditions as well as the imaginative inspiration of the filmmaker. The result is a deeply personal work of devotional art – a moving Stations of the Cross, so to speak.

However, by choosing to narrow his focus almost exclusively to the Passion of Christ, Gibson has, perhaps, muted Christ’s teachings, making it difficult for viewers unfamiliar with the New Testament and the era’s historical milieu to contextualize the circumstances leading up to Jesus’ arrest. And though, for Christians, the Passion is the central event in the history of salvation, the “how” of Christ’s death is lingered on at the expense of the “why?”

The film employs a visceral, undiluted realism in its retelling of the passion, eschewing Sunday School delicacy in favor of in-your-face rawness that is much too intense for children. That notwithstanding, the movie is an artistic achievement in terms of its textured cinematography, haunting atmospherics, lyrical editing, detailed production design and soulful score. It loses nothing by using the languages of the time, Aramaic and Latin, as the actors’ expressions transcend words, saying as much – if not more than – the English subtitles.

The film opens with a distraught Jesus (Jim Caviezel) facing down evil, personified as an androgynous being (played by Rosalinda Celentano), in the mist shrouded garden of Gethsemane and progresses to his death on the cross, followed by a fleeting, but poetically economic, resurrection coda. Flashbacks of his public ministry and home life in Nazareth with his mother, Mary (Maia Morgenstern) pepper the action, filling in some of the narrative blanks.

Each flashback in the film is a welcome respite from the near incessant bloodletting, but more importantly for how it conveys Jesus’ core message of God’s boundless love for humanity, a love that does not spare his son’s death on the cross so that we might have eternal life. More of these flashbacks would have been helpful in fleshing out the life and teachings of Jesus.

Concerning the issue of anti-Semitism, the Jewish people are at no time blamed collectively for Jesus’ death; rather Christ himself freely embraces destiny, stating clearly “No one takes it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:18). By extension, Gibson’s film suggests that all humanity shares culpability for the crucifixion, a theological stance established by the movie’s opening quotation from the prophet Isaiah which explains that Christ was “crushed for our transgressions.”

Catholics viewing the film should recall the teachings of the Second Vatican Council’s decree, “Nostra Aetate,” which affirms that, “though Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.”

Overall, the film presents Jews in much the same way as any other group – a mix of vice and virtue, good and bad. Yet while the larger Jewish community is shown to hold diverse opinions concerning Christ's fate – exemplified by the cacophony of taunts and tears along the Via Dolorosa – it fails to reflect the wider political nuances of first-century Judea. The scene of the stock frenzied mob uniformly calling for Christ's crucifixion in Pilate's courtyard is problematic, though once Christ begins his laborious way of the cross, Jewish individuals emerge from the crowd to extend kindness – including Veronica wiping his face and Simon of Cyrene helping carry the cross, as a chorus of weeping women lament from the sidelines.

However, the most visually distinctive representatives of Jewish authority – the High Priest Caiphas (Matia Sbragia) and those in the Sanhedrin aligned with him – do come across as almost monolithically malevolent. Caiphas is portrayed as adamant and unmerciful and his influence on Pilate is exaggerated. Conversely, Pontius Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov) is almost gentle with Jesus, even offering his prisoner a drink. This overly sympathetic portrayal of the procurator as a vacillating, conflicted and world-weary backwater bureaucrat, averse to unnecessary roughness and easily coerced by both his Jewish subjects and his conscience-burdened wife, does not mesh with the Pilate of history remembered by the ancient historians as a ruthless and inflexible brute responsible for ordering the execution of hundreds of Jewish rabble-rousers without hesitation.

However, while the members of the Sanhedrin are painted in villainous shades, the film is abundantly clear that it is the Romans who are Christ's executioners (a fact corroborated by both the Nicene Creed and the writings of the Tacitus and Josephus).

The Roman soldiers are unimaginably - even gleefully - sadistic in flaying Jesus to within an inch of his life. "The Passion" is exceedingly graphic in its portrayal of the barbarities of Roman justice. According to Gibson, much of the visual grisliness of Christ's suffering sprung from his own personal meditations on the Passion. As depicted, the violence, while explicit and extreme, does not seem an end in itself. It is not the kind of violence made to look exciting, glamorized or without consequences. It attempts to convey the depths of salvific divine love. Nonetheless, viewers' justifiable reaction is to be repelled by such unremitting inhumanity. In the end, such savagery may be self-defeating in trying to capture the imagination of the everyday moviegoer.

In contrast to Jesus' physical agony is the emotional desolation seen in the figure of the Virgin Mary. When Mary utters, "When, how, where, will you choose to be delivered from this?" the viewer is pierced by the depth of Mary's understanding of Christ's divinity and here sublime acceptance of seeing her son suffer. It tears at one's heart to see Mary struggling to get close to Jesus as he walks through the winding, narrow streets carrying the cross. Seeing him suddenly fall, she is transported, along with the viewers, to Christ's childhood, to a time when she was able to scoop him up when he stumbled. When she finally reaches Jesus, and he is on the ground, crushed by the weight of the cross, it is he who comforts her with his words, "See, mother, I make all things new." Morgenstern's portrayal of Mary is beautifully rendered, never more so than in the Pieta-like tableau when Christ's body is laid in her arms.

The juxtaposition of the wounded and bleeding body of Christ on the cross with scenes of the Last Supper compellingly underscores how the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Christ. Other indelible images include a derided Jesus faltering under the weight of the cross intercut with his earlier triumphant entry into Jerusalem and a single raindrop – a tear from heaven – heralding Christ's death. The power of the cross is also keenly conveyed. Jesus does not recoil from either the horrific scourging at the hands of the Roman soldiers or from carrying the burdensome cross. Instead, he declares his "heart is ready" and embraces the cross as if comforting a fallen sinner. These are truly moving and emotional points in the film.

Cinematically, there are flaws as well as triumphs in Gibson's film, such as a recurring tendency to slip into the horror-genre conventions, including a scene of a guilt-wracked Judas being taunted by little boys whose faces turn into those of grotesque, macabre ghouls. And close-ups of Christ's scarred and mutilated body are truly horrible.

For those coming to the film without a faith perspective it may have little resonance. But for the Christians, "**The Passion of the Christ**" is likely to arouse not only passionate opinions, but hopefully a deeper understanding of the drama of salvation and the magnitude of God's love and forgiveness. It is not about what men did to God, but what God endured for humanity.

Due to gory scenes of torture and crucifixion, a suicide and some frightening images, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III – adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R – restricted.

F. Mike