

Gibson's "Passion" film, one more time

We saw Gibson's film here in Singapore. Easter Monday. US\$2 each for goldie oldies.

My take:

The second hero (possibly the first?) is Mary. That's where Gibson's old-style Catholicism jumped off the screen for me. She too is a suffering servant. Hers is bloodless in contrast to the oozing blood of her son. And if suffering is the sine qua non of saving sinners, he presents her to us (almost) as co-redemptrix. Is Gibson proclaiming that when she mops up Jesus' own blood from the torture chamber and makes it her own? Even smeared on her face? And then adding more as she kisses the feet of the crucified?

The "Pieta" at the film's end, her holding the corpse, may not rival Michelangelo's in St. Peter's in Rome. But the message is the same: behold these two victims of the Via Dolorosa, two super-human sufferers—one now dead, one still alive. Both of them paradigms of God's love. Is that one redeemer or two? Though this image is classic in the Latin piety of the Western church, it has no textual support in the four gospels. Ditto for other Mary items that Gibson put on the screen.

I've no desire to be bashing the Blessed Virgin. My point is that these Marian addenda are addenda. They are "the Gospel according to Gibson" even though he didn't invent them. But he powerfully puts them before our eyes.

There is a Lutheran style of veneration for Mary. It's spelled out in a Reformation-era classic, Luther's treatise on Mary's Magnificat in Luke's Gospel. The grounds for hyping Mary, says

Martin, are twofold.

1. Mary is “theotokos,” the Greek term from antiquity for “God-bearer.” The divine Logos assumed our human flesh in her body. No other woman (or man) gets that predicate. Honor for Mary is saying: “Look what God did with that girl from Galilee! For us and for our salvation!”
2. Mary is the first example of Christian faith in the NT. A stunning example. Mind-blowing, Martin would say today, if he spoke English. She trusts the promise, the promise about Christ(!) and with sheer faith against all the evidence to the contrary—and all the trouble that she’ll get for it (yes, a sword will pierce her too because of this pregnancy)—she clings to God’s promissory word. We cannot mimic Mary in the first item. We are called to do so with the second, says Luther. Now note: not mime her suffering, her patience, her love, but imitate her faith—her sheer trust in God’s sheer (sometimes so sheer that it’s hard to see or hear) promise. Gibson proposes the former, Luther the latter. Are those differences different enough to be different gospels? Seems so to me.

Back to the movie. Pilate is no thug. He’s an administrator caught in a classic sticky wicket. And in this particular case a cosmic sticky wicket, according to John’s Gospel. He can’t do what he wants, what he knows is right, so he does what he doesn’t want, since he has to do something. [I once chaired a theology department at a university. I’ve got stories.] I found Pilate sympatico.

Roman military occupation forces are sadists. They are indeed bestial beyond belief. Yet...

Think of American Marines in Fallujah these days. 600 Iraqi corpses in the streets to avenge the butchering of four from our side. We butchered at My Lai in Vietnam a generation ago. “We

were trained to be killers . . . and to be happy in our work.” That’s what a U.S. Marine Corps vet told me the other day. Gibson’s Roman occupation forces are no different. Doubtless demoralized by their senseless deployment, and grisly as it is to say so, for them the “simplest solution” for folks who won’t stay under their heel is “to kill the bastards.”

Given the torture we see inflicted on Jesus, he should have died several times before he ever got to Golgatha. That is where the super-human nature of Gibson’s Jesus jumped off the screen for me. And if, as Steve Kuhl said last week, it is with such super-human endurance of suffering that Gibson signals Jesus’ divinity, then here too we have an addendum to the NT witness. He “suffers as we do,” is the uniform canonical message. No superman at all. His endurance is in the same measure as ours. In designating him “Son of God” the Biblical gospel is signalling something else. But maybe you cannot film that. Maybe this medium won’t take that message.

We heard it on Good Friday. “If you ARE the Son of God, come down from the cross.” But the Good News is that it is precisely because he IS the Son of God, this particular Son of God, that he does NOT come down. Jesus is no super-human, he’s mortal. He can die only once. Mel misleads us by having him beaten to death umpteen times and still strong enough (God-like enough?) to stand up and carry two logs (hundreds of pounds!) almost all the way up to Calvary’s holy mountain.

In the NT witness his Son-of-God-ness is his being weak as we are, being mortal as we are, finally being “sinner” as we are, his emptying himself of all the divine perks –see Philippians 2–and doing it all for us and for our salvation. That’s where the deity dimension is–divine mercy, not divine macho. That in this weak divinity “God in Christ was reconciling the world unto Godself–not counting our trespasses against us, but making him

to be sin for us...so that we might become the very righteousness of God IN HIM." The divine super-doooper is in the sweet swap, not in the superman character of the swapper.

Suffering per se is not redemptive, and super-human suffering will not be super-redemptive either. It's all in who the swapper is.

But you probably can't get the really redemptive quotient of Christ's suffering on the screen. Someone like Paul in II Corinthians simply has to tell us, interpret to us in words, what our eyes are seeing. Promises are fundamentally verbal. Words, words to be trusted. Is it even possible to offer a promise only with visuals? I wonder. Can visuals elicit trust? Can visuals even encourage trust? And if so, who are you trusting? And what is the substance of such trust? What's the wine in a visual wineskin? Is the claim of II Cor. 5 accessible without words? I doubt it.

The Sanhedrin presented in the film is dogged once their decision is made. In a reversal of what I think is Jesus' favorite Bible passage, Hosea 6:6, they "desire sacrifice, not mercy." And they stick to that axiom. But apart from faith in Christ, don't we all?

Someone from Canada told us there was no resurrection signalled at the end when he saw the film. Our version here in Singapore had one, a quick minute or two of stone rolling away, grave cloths settling empty on a stone slab and a brief glance at an unbloody Jesus, patently alive and showing his scars—as he does later to Thomas in the lectionary Gospel for this coming Sunday. Here too, I thought, someone has to say—in words—"For you!" Such words did surface once, as I recall, from the mouth of Satan (!) as s/he taunts Jesus in Gethsemane with the utter nonsense of his bearing the sins of all humanity. But no more credible voice

articulates that in the film. We don't even hear it from Jesus, though Gibson could have flashed back to more than one such word from Jesus himself before he went up to Jerusalem.

My point is that without the "for us" the Good News of Good Friday and Easter remain veiled under those grave cloths—even if they cover no corpse.

That must be what Jesus is telling Thomas with "Blessed are those who believe without having seen." Seeing is not believing. Especially not if believing means "trusting the Risen One, for us and for our salvation." Mere "seeing" won't do. For such a promise to be offered to us it takes words. In fact, says Jesus, you don't have to see at all, as Thomas did. For the issue in believing is not: Do corpses revivify? Rather, as Thomas learned, it's this: Has this crucified Messiah conquered death—not just generic death, but MY death? Is that claim credible? If the answer is yes, then there's one proper response. It's doxology: My Lord and my God!

So even hearing is not (yet) believing. Believing is the step after hearing, namely, trusting what you heard.

It broke through to me on Easter Sunday that the Easter exclamation and response

Christ is risen! Hallelujah!
He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

should be parsed as follows: The first Hallelujah is for Jesus' Easter. The second Hallelujah is for ours.

Someone simply has to say the "for us." I didn't hear that message in Gibson's film. It may well be that this medium cannot carry that message. Faith comes by hearing, St. Paul said. The message itself is the medium.

In that Easter message, Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder