

Mel Gibson's Movie: THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

Colleagues,

Couple of weeks ago a ThTh reader in Fairbanks Alaska asked me (here on the equator in Singapore!) when I was going to do a review of Gibson's Passion movie. He got specific: Several Questions;

What would the movie look like (or if it wouldn't even be, why not?) if Mel had come to the Crossings Community and said – "Help Me...be my theological consultant" rather than going to the S.J. [=Jesuit] who was in the film credits? Does this movie reflect Luther's theology of the cross, as some reviewers (who were not Lutheran) have suggested?

How do I, as a parish pastor, address my Sunday School Teachers on Saturday (yeah, this Saturday) to discuss the movie, one of whom feels "this movie was inspired by God" and another who feels it is commercial exploitation?

Who can help me with my "elevator speech" about the difference between a theology of the cross and a theology about the cross? My current speech ends with the elevator empty and me mumbling to myself that I thought I knew what I was going to say...

Why did I, and a lot of other pastors, get caught up in the frenzy without having seen it?

I responded to this Polar Plea saying I'd not seen the film and it wouldn't open until today (April 1) here in Singapore. I also had no knowledge of the "frenzy" he mentioned that the film has apparently churned up in the USA. So I was ignorant both of the

cause and the context of the hullabaloo. Hardly credentials for doing a review.

But I learned that ThTh co-conspirator Robin Morgan had seen the film early on—and she also knows about the “frenzy.” So for this Thursday’s posting here are Robin’s reflections. We’ll find out if she helps lighten the burden that this Polar pastor must bear.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Who Do You Say That I Am? A Review of Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”

By Robin Morgan

It seems to me that Lutherans are particularly good at three significant days in our lives: infant baptisms, funerals and Good Friday. These are moments when nothing we can do will make any difference in the outcome. An infant in arms, a family grieving the loss of a loved one, disciples standing at the foot of the cross are all equally impotent to effect what is taking place. Here in these extreme moments, our Lord’s promise to us, justification by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, stands out in bold relief. We are indeed beggars. It is only God’s gracious act on our behalf through Jesus Christ that makes any difference.

Which is why I don’t completely understand the hue and cry among Lutherans about Mel Gibson’s film, “The Passion of the Christ.”

Granted, the movie is devoid of context. Except for a few flashbacks of tender interludes with his mother or disciples, Jesus' life and ministry are absent. Even why this man is being tortured and put to death is not entirely clear. Why when countless people over the centuries have been subjected to this kind of degradation and worse did Gibson make a movie about this one?

Granted, the stereotypic anti-Semitic images are straight out of medieval European piety that led to horrific suffering among Jewish people at the hands of Christians. The Church must forever acknowledge our sins of anti-Semitism and guard against anything that fans the flames of such prejudice and the monstrous consequences that come from it.

Granted, Pilate, unlike the indecisive, but seemingly well meaning bureaucrat caught in a no-win situation in the movie, was a ruthless thug who ruled Palestine with the iron rod of Rome.

Nonetheless, the whole movie is about those hours when the evil humanity's sin had unleashed was brought to its despicable, inevitable conclusion. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, was tortured and put to death. The whole movie is about those hours when our actions or inactions meant nothing – when God as Judge and Christ as sacrificial lamb and savior are center stage battling for our lives.

It was violent. He wasn't a beautifully carved corpus hanging on a cross made from highly polished Black Forest wood. He was flesh and blood in agony. Yet even those of us who profess/confess the depth of Lutheran theology don't want to accept that it was that bad. We want our Jesus gentle and pleasant – someone who teaches our children to be kind and moral, but then gets out of the way when the real work of

running the world is being done. In some ways, regardless of its shortcomings, this movie rubs our noses in Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Why would those of us who profess/confess the depth of Lutheran theology shy away from the opportunities this movie provides to speak about our Lord? Start wherever your conversation partner starts. Whether you begin with the anti-Semitism, the violence, or the androgynous Satan, follow Philip's example when he was speaking with the Ethiopian eunuch, "Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this [the question about Isaiah 53 that the Ethiopian posed], he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." (Acts 8:35)

The core of what we have to offer the church catholic and the world is being portrayed in movie theatres around the globe. Of course it's the Gospel according to Mel, so what? As Paul says in Philippians, "Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my sufferings in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice." (Phil 1:15-18)

If our only purpose is to preserve pure doctrine and 16th/17th century counterpoint, then we need to rethink calling ourselves church. I know that church is wherever the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments administered, but is the Word being rightly preached when mission to the world really isn't part of our agenda? We might as well retreat behind the walls of our architecturally superior buildings with our pure doctrine and proper sacred music like the medieval monks who copied illuminated manuscripts and considered themselves above the

common people. Whoever may be the Luthers of our day won't even be on our radar screens except as enemies.

It's messy out here in the world. Messy and violent. No movie will ever be able to portray exactly what happened on that first Good Friday. But film is an important means of communicating in our post-literate culture. Wade out into the muck of pop culture and proclaim the good news of Jesus. The Lord's promise to us, justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, is made for such extreme moments. And in the doing, we may be enriched in ways we never imagined possible.