

COMMENTARIES ON 'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST' by Jon Walker: A master storyteller presents a crucified

February 24, 2004

Posted: 2/24/04

COMMENTARIES ON 'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST': A master storyteller presents a crucified Christ

By Jon Walker

Hollywood is notorious for typecasting, but the truth is we all typecast in some form or another, consciously or unconsciously putting people into little boxes and then insisting they stay there.

And perhaps that is why, when I heard Mel Gibson was making a film about the crucifixion, I immediately formed an image of Mad Max on the Via Dolorosa. My standard joke became, "Danny Glover and Mel Gibson arrive at the end of the movie to rescue Jesus from the Cross."

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Yet, artists grow and mature—which is why Woody Allen, who once made one-liner comedies, and Clint Eastwood, who once starred in spaghetti westerns, are now respected Academy Award-winning directors.

For that matter, so is Gibson, with an Oscar for “Braveheart.”

All that to say: “The Passion of the Christ” reveals Gibson as a maturing filmmaker in his prime as a storyteller, and the movie makes it nearly impossible to keep him typecast as the star of the Mad Max/Lethal Weapon-styled movies.

“The Passion of the Christ” is both beautiful and brutal, capturing an authentic human spirit that is often missing in biblical movies, those where everyone tends to act stifflingly serious and talk in pious this-is-all-so-important tones. Gibson’s “Passion” is full of real people who laugh and cry and sweat and, yes, they bleed.

The essence of a great poem is that it gets you to look at the familiar in a different way, and in that sense, this film is poetic. Just the fact that it is presented in the original languages allows you to see a familiar story and hear familiar words but from an entirely different angle (there are English subtitles). This is a film layered with artistry and historic metaphor, and if you look closely, I think you’ll see Gibson’s homage to some of the great master paintings of Christ’s Passion.

The poetic artistry starts with the opening frames, set in the Garden of Gethsemane, where you immediately realize this is no tepid tale, one traditionally told with a blue-eyed, blonde, surfer-dude Jesus sprinkling love and faith across the cinematic landscape as if it were pixie-dust tossed from Tinkerbell’s wand. (Think good thoughts and you, too, can fly!)

Gibson’s Jesus has dark, ethnic features (probably closer to the way Jesus actually looked), and he’s so distraught as he begs the Father to release him from the suffering set before him that spit and snot drip from his face.

A few moments later, you get a sense of the overwhelming abandonment Jesus must have felt when he returned to his disciples only to find them sleeping, and then he is tempted to break with the Father by an embodiment of Evil that re-appears throughout the movie. The temptations are not just about saving himself; they attempt to fan into flames a sense of despair.

The film's pacing is taut, and the tension simmers but never boils over because of some well-crafted flashbacks that deepen the film's emotional core. These flashbacks also explain some of the key relationships and critical events that led to the final 12 hours of Christ's life.

Of particular note is a scene with Jesus, lean and calloused, working as a carpenter, engrossed, not in theology, but in carefully crafting a table. Evidently, one can be the Son of God and still find purpose and enjoyment in the ordinary tasks of life—a biblical message we often ignore.

This scene not only gives a rare glimpse of Jesus as a carpenter, but as it plays out, you see the playful interaction between Mary and Jesus as a mother and son who enjoy each other's company. The scene reflects Gibson's gift with humor, and it pulled an audible laugh from the audience.

Mary, portrayed by Maia Morgenstern, is shown as a real woman, full of faith but gripped by grief. No saintly icon, she struggles under the weight of what she is witnessing. The most memorable moment in the movie for me was a later scene, after the scourging of Jesus, where Mary got down on her hands and knees and began to mop up the blood with a cloth. Having watched my own wife care for two dead children, I thought the scene rang absolutely true in revealing a woman in grief and shock.

Jim Caviezel plays Jesus. He met Gibson when the director was developing a film on surfing (go figure!), and Caviezel came in to discuss a part. In the midst of the conversation, Caviezel said he wanted to suggest another film

that would be far more important, and then the actor reached into his pocket and pulled out a pamphlet about Christ crucified.

What Caviezel didn't know is that Gibson had been researching and thinking through the "Passion" movie for over a decade, and it was in that moment Gibson says he knew he was supposed to make the "Passion."

Caviezel as Christ is clearly modeled after the Shroud of Turin, an ancient burial cloth inexplicably imprinted with the image of a crucified man, similar to a modern photographic negative. There are some who believe this is the burial shroud of Jesus, and the image provides a supernatural picture of Christ. In some scenes, Caviezel mirrors the shroud's image, including the bruising and blood droplets.

Related to the Shroud, the film is naturally informed by a Catholic text (Gibson is a Catholic believer) and so some of the scenes dramatize the extra-biblical explanations for ancient "holy trinkets," or the speculative stories of what may have happened as Christ walked the Via Dolorosa to Calvary.

Regardless of your own beliefs, the scenes serve the storyteller well and provide the necessary emotional depth to move this movie beyond a grueling glimpse into Roman cruelty.

Another way Gibson keeps you directly involved in the story is through the use of startling point-of-view shots based on the "eyes" of different characters. For instance, you're upside down as Jesus is carried, head hanging upside down, from the scourging, and you're on the ground looking at the feet of Jesus through the eyes of the woman saved from a stoning.

"Passion" is a tightly shot film, built largely around close-ups and medium frames that keep the images personal and within reach; don't expect an abundance of Cecil B. DeMille-styled panoramics. Rather, Gibson keeps the

story focused on the messy, little details that reveal what happened on the streets of ancient Jerusalem during this one dawn and day.

For instance, I like the fact that Peter's denials of Christ are impulsive and quick, near hysterical denials made in the grip of fear, as opposed to the typical telling where the whole world comes to a stop to hear each denial. Unlike us, these men didn't know the end of the story, and it's likely they responded with real fear and confusion.

This kind of authenticity is refreshing in a biblical play, and that's as good a transition as any into the violence of the film. Gibson says he wanted to shock people, forcing them to see just how horrific the Passion must have been, and I think he succeeds. By the end of the film, it's doubtful you'd even want to see Osama Bin Laden put through the torture Jesus willfully receives.

But the violence is never gratuitous. This is a much more serious and aesthetic film than something like *Mad Max* or *Lethal Weapon*. The violence is there because it is a story about the bloody, violent, cruel death of a man. Frankly, I have trouble watching something like *E.R.* because I dislike the gore, yet, there was only one moment in the "Passion" when I had to look away, and that was during a particularly brutal moment when the Romans whipped Jesus.

While we're on this subject, the movie is rated "R" because of the violence. Gibson, noting the graphic violence, says, "I don't think kids younger than 13 should see it." I would agree with this assessment.

Is Gibson's "Passion" a perfect film? Of course, not. What film would be? I thought the opening minute or so was too dark and a baby-carrying embodiment of Evil during the scourging scenes confused some of the people around me (we were watching a rough cut).

Yet one way I gauge a good story is whether it leaves me wanting more and

whether it makes me feel like jumping into the world of the characters. Certainly at the crucifixion, you want nothing more than to get away from the oppressive and horrendous cruelty, but the final 20 seconds of the film, a creative take on the Resurrection, leaves you wanting to walk out of the tomb with Jesus and see the joy of his disciples.

But most of all, I longed to join this joy-filled Jesus in his carpentry shop, becoming a friend as well as a disciple.

If you push past all the hype and all the controversy, and even all the plans of using the film for evangelism, I think you'll find "The Passion of the Christ" is a great work of art, the product of a gifted storyteller striving toward a masterwork.

There was a time when the arts often spoke about God, and it wasn't shocking to have a major artist create a work based on biblical themes. In fact, it was often through funding from the church that great artists were able to create their masterworks. Perhaps Gibson's gritty, bloody film will usher in a new age, where the church returns to supporting artistic expression as a means of telling the old, old story.

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