



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 04 April 2004
Title: "THE FILM"
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 45:21-25
Second Reading Philippians 2:5-11
Gospel Luke 23:1-49

Yes, I have seen it.

The film, I mean. And you know the film I'm talking about: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. I was invited to see a special preview showing last week, and that means I have had some time to think about it.

People ask me, "Did you *like* it?"

That's hard to answer. Is *like* a word one uses for more than two hours of blood and pain and death? I don't think so. In fact, that's part of the problem for me: the *Passion*, as a film, forces us to use language to describe it that isn't really appropriate. Film critics have to review the piece the way they do *Scooby-do* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. American late-night talk show hosts make fun of it; it's fair game as an undeniable part of current popular culture. That can't be right. And yet it isn't right either to force us to treat a cinemagraphic event as though it were sacred Scripture, which is what some church groups are doing.

The film is stirring, and many people find it spiritually moving. But I was disturbed. I know how influential the media can be. I don't need to tell you that, living as we all do in a country where a movie star may become president in a month's time. I didn't necessarily see the film as anti-semitic. Yes, there are bad, compromised and cruel people in it who are Jews. But the good people in the film are Jews, too. Then there are the bad, compromised and cruel Romans, but I am yet to hear anyone complain that the Passion is anti-Italian! Gibson tries hard to make us experience 1st century life as it might have been, and that succeeds, especially in hearing the familiar words in an approximation of the languages that would have been spoken then. But it is not a documentary using old film footage. It is a movie.

The old hymn asks us, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And the answer has got to be "no." We may *feel* that we are there when watching the film, but we will not have been. The pope saw the film and pronounced, "It is as it was." But he cannot possibly know. That's going to be the problem with any attempt to be objective about Mel Gibson's work, or any other version of the story.

And that's part of the issue. We have just heard the very same story ["performed" (as it were) as a kind of reader's theatre. It is an old tradition going back many centuries and meant to make the narrative of Christ's last hours even more dramatic...very much like the film.] But also like the film, this treatment can also isolate the story from us. We can say, "I didn't like hearing it read *that way*," just as we can express our views of Gibson's film. And so we get stuck in the medium while we ignore the purpose of this sacred text that we make so much of every year.

The purpose of hearing this text year after year on this day is more than just the storyline, events so familiar to us that perhaps we need a new version now and then just to wake us up. The purpose, you see, is to force us to reevaluate our relationship to this man Jesus every year in light of who he is for us *right now*.

As Archbishop Williams wrote in the book our Lenten group is using this year, the trial (or indeed the entire Passion) of Christ forces the world to consider where it stands. Williams writes: "All the trial narratives of the Gospels come to place one

single charge against us: we choose to be somewhere other than where Christ is. Each Gospel in its own way challenges us to step down from the tribunal to stand with Jesus."

Whether it is a film or a dramatic reading, we may wish to be a bystander, watching it all happen. But Christ invites us to stand with him: to risk everything to experience the ultimate freedom of having surrendered one's whole life to a principle so good and so pure that it doesn't at first make sense: to a Person who is beyond all stereotype calling us to a whole new way of relating to God. If Christ is who he claims to be, then that risk is not only worth it, but nothing else is worth anywhere near as much.

In the end, you don't need to see a movie to know what Christ did for the world, and although it helps to know the story from the Bible, even *that* won't necessarily change your life. But the lives of men and women around you whose way of seeing the world has changed because of knowing the Christ who suffered, who died and who was raised from the dead- that just *might*. And you will find them here, sitting next to you, and out there on the streets of Makati. They're the *Christians* who by their lives are proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what it means to them until the end of the world. And they will be there, giving their witness, long after films and the controversies that surround them are forgotten.

The Passion of the Christ: you may have seen it, and you've just heard it.

What do *YOU* think?