



Murdoch
UNIVERSITY

MURDOCH RESEARCH REPOSITORY

*This is the author's final version of the work, as accepted for publication following peer review but without the publisher's layout or pagination.
The definitive version is available at*

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001452460411501202>

[Loader, W.R.G.](#) (2004) *'The passion of the christ' and the suffering of jesus: A reflection on Mel Gibson's film*. *Expository Times*, 115 (12). pp. 401-403.

<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/16396/>

Copyright: © 2004 SAGE

It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.

'The Passion of the Christ' and the Passion of Jesus

A Reflection on Mel Gibson's Film

William Loader

What would it be like to have a camera trained on a session of torture or on the last days of a child dying of starvation or on the events of brutality inflicted on a murder victim? Why does that not make good television? Perhaps with reality TV it would. Mel Gibson's film is dominated by scenes of brutality. Far beyond the proportions present in the gospels the sufferings dominate the story. The scourgings go on at great length, the forced carrying of the cross becomes a long chapter of torment. The crucifixion itself takes place only after further invented cruelty where the cross with Jesus on it is tipped about on the ground. One could scarcely make it more gruesome.

There are moments of escape for the viewer: a tender scene of childhood where the boy Jesus falls and Mary rushes to his side. Mary is constantly present, enduring the horror to the end. The eyes of mother and son often meet amid the despair. But then it is back to the relentless pain. If this is not R rated violence designed to give a buzz, such as we have become used to in much that is supposed to entertain us, what is the point of such concentration on the brutality? Senseless brutality against the innocent rouses disgust and revulsion. For many it rouses rage and hate. The Jewish leaders and the masses which heed them are the prime movers. By the mob rules of behaviour they invite hate. Coming a close second are the lower ranked soldiers who are portrayed as obsessed with brutality. The depiction of both incites abhorrence. Yet struggling against this, perhaps even within the film itself, are words which call for forgiveness and love of enemies. How dare one brutalise the person who calls for love! How much more hateful!? But that misses the point - at least of Jesus.

So why focus so much on the suffering? Possibly the opening citation from Isaiah 53 (dated wrongly by 150 years) provides the clue. 'He was wounded for our transgressions'. Jesus' words in Gethsemane receive a similar supplement suggesting suffering for the sins of all is the theme. The Satanic, appearing as a woman (why?), seeks to allure Jesus from this undertaking. He had to go through all that brutality so that our sins may be forgiven. Sometimes it was as though the deeper the cuts and the bloodier the wounds the more secure would be our salvation. Is that why we needed to see almost every moment of pain? Was it to shame us to believe or keep believing?

Confronting another's pain is never easy. While richly expanding the gospel story with even more gratuitous violence, the film probably captures the essence of the brutality which would have been exercised on the many thousands who faced crucifixion. The horror of human cruelty has marred every century, every decade. Some will have suffered much more, some less than Jesus. The

Christian story is not setting out to claim his was the greatest suffering. In the film those dimensions of suffering which most crush the spirit, despair and disillusionment, receive relatively little attention, compared with the rank physical afflictions.

Violence is abhorrent and confronts our own violence as well as putting us in touch with our own experiences of abuse. And, yes, we were there when they crucified him, perhaps playing many roles. The film's image of the destructiveness and inhumanity of rigid religion is familiar to us within our own and the pathetic figure of Pilate driven by political necessity and fear to betray goodness and justice repeats itself in our own time.

The gospel story left its moorings in history very early to become a timeless mirror of inhumanity, the persistence of love and the persistence of hate in collision. Already by the time of the gospels the story is as much about fierce conflicts among Jews about Jesus as it is about what once happened. Failure to appreciate the tension of the gospel writers and their hearers, desperate to lay the blame on their opponents, opens the door to misunderstandings which at worst see the Jews as a people cursed as killers of God. The film does little to change this.

Novelistic traits embroider the edges of the story. Pilate's wife becomes a legendary Christian. One of the brutal soldiers bows the knee. Matthew's earthquake become a literal event of major proportions, while strangely the sky only slightly darkens and the centurion misses his cue to acclaim Jesus Son of God or at least righteous - unless I missed it. The legend of Pilate's wife enhances the image of Pilate as strangely confused and then tragically weak.

Elaborate attention to contemporary costumes and conversations in Aramaic lend an air of reality (though not Jesus speaking Latin). But the context is otherwise ignored. Even that most important context of all, Jesus' ministry and teaching, scarcely rates a mention. One would never know he saw his message as good news for the poor and hungry. His radical compassion for the marginalised is not deemed relevant. To somewhat overstate the case, it is as though we are asked to observe the brutalisation of God's hero, but are never told why he was a hero. We are seeing the cruel mangling of a good man, God's man, but we are given little to inform us what that goodness was. Perhaps he was mainly concerned to save our souls, as the Gethsemane subtitles suggest - by taking our punishment? - as though God would otherwise hold compassion back because a debt was unpaid. Then what preceded the event was little more than a set of impressive preliminaries to enhance credentials. By contrast, the earliest gospel, Mark, suggests that John the Baptist was already offering God's forgiveness freely to all. The two single times Mark says anything like Jesus dies for us (10:45; 14:24), it must mean much more than forgiveness of sins.

Even if one stayed strictly within the gospels, there are clues which might break the stereotypical portrait of the hostile Jewish leaders. On the basis of John 11:47-53 one might catch a glimpse of a wider agenda, of leaders fearing Roman oppression and willing to sacrifice a stirrer to prevent

Roman provoking it. The accusation, 'King of the Jews', might have opened connections to the feared and admired movements for liberation from the Romans, whose freedom songs surround the infancy of John and Jesus in Luke. One might have recognised that Jesus and those crucified with him and probably Barabbas had much more in common than the film portrays. They all sought Israel's liberation from the Romans, but differed largely in the means. This was too fine a distinction for the Romans, who were satisfied with the generic charge: 'King of the Jews'.

There are dimensions of hope and dimensions of suffering which make it almost a contradiction of Jesus himself to isolate his sufferings from that of his people. Even the use of Son of Man, alluding to Daniel 7, suggests such a sense of solidarity. Instead of the one anointed to bring the hope of good news to his people and to live it out already in the present, we have in the film a beleaguered martyr, a rallying point for all who fear and find enemies before and behind. Without the wider agenda the film's citation of Jesus' command to love enemies is lame and in the script virtually abandoned. In form the film hates the enemy and makes no attempt to probe the roots of the violence it shows.

You cannot really understand the passion of Jesus unless you have some idea of what Jesus was passionate about. Without it the portrayal of the passion too easily becomes a spectacle of brutality. Brutalisation is inevitably revelatory. But good news in a world in which we brutalise still, still needs to offer liberation and change. Ultimately the solution is not making war on evil and those who hate us, but addressing what generates the pain to which some respond with acts of terror, as they did also in the time of Jesus. He addressed that pain with hope. Hope and love have a way of creating a different kind of faith from belief that one is right. There was more to Christ's passion than being brutalised or being a substitute victim. The compassion of hope and the call for change are the real passion, in his life and in his death.