

Atonement, Blood, and a Horrible Death

By Adrian Zytkoskee

People had already gathered by the time I arrived, even though a cold, heavy rain was coming down. A man who drove a Springs of Living Water church van arrived and began to pass out pamphlets. I took one and went into the theater.

I had purchased my ticket a week before. I saved a seat for my daughter as the theater filled rapidly. As I waited for the film to begin, I tried to imagine who else was attending and what kind of expectations they had brought with them.

I thought of the church I was raised in. My picture of Christ was always two dimensional, usually involving a white-robed Jesus surrounded by children in the sylvan surroundings of what we always called "the earth made new." Sometimes there was a picture of Christ in the same white robe standing beside and supporting a contemporary surgeon in the midst of an operation. Sometimes Christ was knocking at the door of someone's middle-class home, waiting to be invited in.

What about people from other churches, many calling themselves "Evangelicals," who had come to this first showing? Did they come to be shattered by the enormity of their own sins, which made necessary the saving sacrifice of Christ? Were there charismatics who had heard Mel Gibson describe the role of the Holy Ghost in inspiring this film?

What about politically oriented Christians, possibly present in support of a Hollywood icon who had the courage to challenge the liberal, amoral Hollywood establishment? How many of Gibson's own type of pre-Vatican II Catholics had come—people accustomed to contemplating a bleeding, half-naked figure who wore a crown of thorns and hung on a cross? Finally, I thought of stern-faced attendees who might be there, fearful of and vigilant against the anti-Semitism that has permeated so much of Christian history.

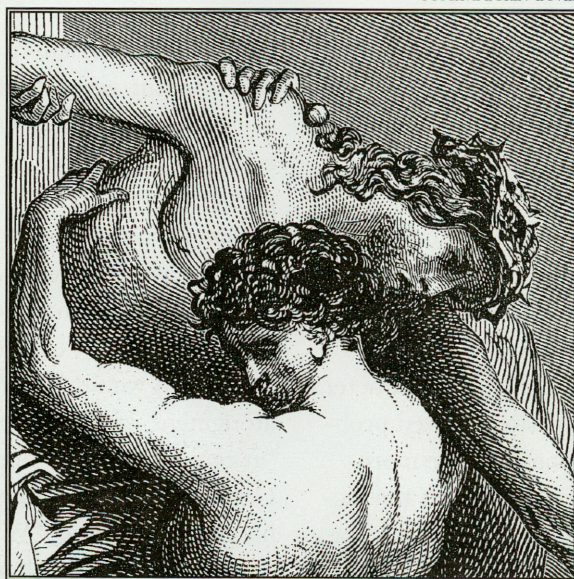
Then the movie began and I tried to pretend I was hearing and seeing the story of Jesus for the first time. One of the most important qualities of a truly good film is beauty, both in writing and cinematography. Gibson's film uses only Aramaic and Latin, with English subtitles, so I have no basis for evaluating the script. However, from the beginning the colors, contrasts, and scene sets were beautiful, from the shadowy Garden of Gethsemane to the lantern-lit faces of the Sanhedrin leaders bargaining with Judas.

The acting was competent to good with the Christ, played by James Caviezel, seeming to have great possibilities but with a strangely limited role. Maia Morgenstern, who played Jesus' mother, gave a quietly stand-out performance.

Unfortunately for Gibson, the film is made in such a way that only knowledgeable believers are likely to have the religious epiphany Gibson clearly hopes for. The Christ we saw was a bloody victim (emphasis on blood), beaten and dragged through the streets. We saw only the briefest of flashbacks to help

us understand who he was and why he was tortured and killed. We did not see much of Jesus the leader, the teacher, the healer.

What we did see was incomprehensible cruelty, unexplainable evil, and unimaginable violence. When Christ was scourged with ninety lashes we took ten minutes to see all ninety. I know that during this time my mind should have turned to the beautiful words in Isaiah that describe how Christ was scourged for my iniquities, but I was dwelling on the brutal whip holders and hoping for vengeance. I think it accurate to say that the film is more about evil than about good.



GUSTAVE DORE / DOVER



It is impossible to overstate the level of violence in this film. Although attempts will be made to justify that violence as showing what Christ suffered for each of us, any honest critic must note that violence and bloodshed have cinematic production values that have long been exploited.

As I watched the beautifully filmed but exceptionally violent scenes I thought about the almost symbiotic relation between violence and what many consider cinematic excellence. One of the most enduring images in movie history is the bullet-riddled bodies of Bonnie and Clyde. Many critics consider *Kill Bill*, Quentin

Think of the abstractions we cherish to keep from thinking about the central place of violent death in our system. Our theologians use words like *type* and *anti-type* to describe the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament. They understand the whole ceremonial system as prefiguring the life and death of Christ, which forever solved the "sin problem."

But as we see the awful events on the screen our minds are not automatically directed to a neat package where the types and antitypes are wrapped and tied in a forensic bow. Christ, the "lamb of God," scrubbed clean of real meaning begins to be real. In our mind's

Gibson's film is uncomfortably old-fashioned in that it vividly reminds us of what stands at the center of the Christian faith.

Tarantino's "stylistically violent" film, to be among the best films of 2003.

What about the violence in this powerful depiction of the death of Christ? Is it actually an antiviolence message? I think not. Consider another current film, one I admire very much: Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River*. The violence there is almost random, and when given a purpose it accomplishes something it most wants to avoid. In other words, violence solves nothing.

This is a far cry from the "make my day" characters of Eastwood's past, whose violent actions solved problems once and for all. The bigger the gun, the more satisfying the solution. It is also a far cry from the violent crucifixion of Christ, which believers consider the most meaningful act in human history. Unfortunately, the film does little to help viewers see this meaning.

Then, suddenly, I realized that the crucifixion as an atoning blood sacrifice—an idea certainly in the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy—was at least implied in the imagery and context of the film. Given that understanding, I begin to see the real meaning and power of Gibson's film. Unlike many recent controversial films about Christ, Gibson's is not revisionist.

But it is controversial because it strips away the euphemisms around Christ's sacrifice that have made Christianity and our Judeo-Christian heritage welcome in polite society. At the same time, those euphemisms have prevented us from recognizing that violent death and the horrors that go with it stand at the center of our faith, and that death as a solution is the cornerstone of our theology.

eye we see the flashing knives of the ancient priests and hear the screams of the sacrificed animals.

If we listen more carefully, we hear the menacing echoes of human screams, dying young people killed to please angry gods. We wonder when Yahweh ceased to demand that fathers sacrifice their sons as a test of their loyalty and when he became the God who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" so that we might be saved.

When we see *The Passion of the Christ* we see the atonement, and no amount of parsing the word into "at-one-ment" (meaning "reconciled and together with God") can hide the fact that it involves a bloody, horrible death. We sing, "Would you be free from the burden of sin, there is wonderful power in the blood," but we hide from the picture all that the metaphor implies. We instruct one another to "eat, this is my body" and "drink, this is my blood" and have little idea what we should think when we weigh these words.

Gibson's film is uncomfortably old-fashioned in that it vividly reminds us of what stands at the center of the Christian faith. In that spirit of uncompromising acceptance of our Christian heritage I will quote the sixteenth-century cry of Christopher Marlowe: "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament.... One drop would save my soul—half a drop: ah, my Christ" (*The Tragical Victory of Dr. Faustus*).

If that inspires you, by all means go and see the film.

Retired educator and administrator Adrian Zytoskee lives in Placerville, California.