

---

## *It's About Blood*

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

"Blood." That is the best single word I can use to describe Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ." The movie is certainly not a strictly biblical account of Jesus's last twelve hours. It not only makes generous use of pious legends which became part of the Christian tradition after Jesus's death, but it also includes a touching scene in which the mother of Jesus remembers him falling as a young child. It includes horrifying visions of Satan and various demons throughout the last twelve hours of Jesus. None of these scenes is depicted in the four gospel accounts.

However, the movie does depict blood, and lots of it. Almost all the blood belongs to Jesus, having flowed from his body after two different series of lashings, after a crown of thorns has been smashed into his head, and after nails have pierced his hands and feet. But the blood of the movie is also sacramental; blood makes a special sacramental appearance when Jesus remembers the last supper with his disciples. In the film, as Jesus' mother wipes his blood from pavement, I was also reminded of reverent church practice when consecrated communion wine is spilled.

In their way, movies are like acts of faith; both are expressions of creative imagination. When we act in faith, we are attempting to live out, or to express, something that is as yet not lived out or expressed. Sometimes our faith requires us be amazingly creative and imaginative. We find ourselves setting new courses, charting new territory, because we are trying to live out traditional faith in a new time, or perhaps in a new genre.

Movies, too, are expressions of creative imagination. The producers, directors, writers, and actors use amazing creativity and imagination in order to visually express some image or message that might otherwise remain un-discovered. So it is that Mel Gibson has used his significant creative imagination to portray a particular image of the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus Christ.

In the crowded tumble of "pre-game" conversations and "post-game" wrap-ups about this movie, I have been asked three particular questions more than any others: Is it accurate? Is it violent? Is it anti-Semitic? Here is a summary of my answers.

I do not believe the movie even claims to be literally accurate to Holy Scripture. In this way, "The Passion" differs significantly from previous film versions of the life of Jesus (see the 2000 "Jesus," or the 1978 "Jesus of Nazareth," or even the 1964 "The Gospel According to St. Matthew" for literally correct movies.) But the movie is accurate to something else. It is an accurate literalization of a particular Christian piety and legend.

There is a piece of Christian piety-perhaps even a "blood type"-which focuses overwhelmingly on the literal blood of Jesus as the saving event of humankind. Not every Christian tradition is so focused, but one particular strain of Christianity is. For centuries, this strain has been identified with certain traditions of Roman Catholicism, but it is obviously part of an American Protestant and evangelical tradition, too. This particular Christian piety fixes on blood: blood shed, blood given up, blood blessed, blood drunk. This movie will distinguish those Christians who need for their faith the image of violent bloodshed, from those who do not, and from those whose theology lies somewhere in the middle of the two extremes.

In terms of accuracy, an amazing number of scenes and conversations in "The Passion of the Christ" have their roots not in the literal words of Christian scripture, but in the words and scenes of sincere pious legend that have developed in

Christianity. These include, particularly, the meeting of Jesus and his mother on the Via Dolorosa, the wiping of Jesus' face by Seraphia (later renamed "Veronica" because the "true image" -vera icon- of Christ was left on her linens), the wiping of Jesus' blood from the pavement, and even the "thirty-nine" lashes given to Jesus. (The gospel accounts mention one "scourging," but they provide no further details of what the film portrays as two different, consecutive, counted, lashings).

Many of these extra-biblical scenes and conversations are accurate not to the Bible, but to a deeply pious account of one Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), who had a vision of the passion of the Christ which she wrote down as "The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ." Much of the actual dialogue in Gibson's film seems to have directly taken from Emmerich's vision; I counted twelve scenes or conversations which are not in scripture but which are in Emmerich (including the startling scene of Pilate's wife delivering linens to Mary the mother of Jesus).

Is the film violent? Yes, it certainly is. Other words have been used to describe the beatings and abuse: graphic, sadistic, brutal, gory. But there is no escaping the outright violence of the film. In this respect, the movie is indeed accurate to the gospel accounts: Jesus of Nazareth died a violent and bloody and innocent death. The violence, then, cannot be called gratuitous. Of course, the gospels tell much more about Jesus than just his death. But the very title of Gibson's movie should warn us of its contents; this movie is about the passion, the suffering, the last twelve hours of Jesus's life-not what happened before or after those events.

One of the problems with violence, especially un-deserved violence, is that it raises the issues of judgement and blame. Who can we blame for such un-deserved brutality? Christian orthodoxy will always claim that all of humanity is to blame. No one person, or group, can be blamed for the death of Jesus. Rather, his death is the result of the sin of ordinary people who thought they were doing the right thing. As someone has said, it was not the worst people who put Jesus to death; it was the best people. It is the best that humanity has to offer who do violence to Jesus. It is us, especially those of us who think ourselves above such monstrosity.

In the final analysis, "The Passion of the Christ," is probably no more anti-Semitic than are the four gospel accounts. The problem, of course, is that, literally speaking, the four gospel accounts do contain anti-Semitic images and remarks. It has been the painful responsibility of Christians since the time of Christ to renounce those anti-Semitic tendencies in scripture and to renounce the outright anti-Semitic actions of Christians in history.

The depiction of Jewish leaders in the New Testament (especially in the Gospel of John) should provide us an outright warning against over-literalizing scripture. When religious people literalize anything in scripture, we run the risk of denying the greater and deeper truths that are in that same scripture. Over-literalizing scripture has certainly been the source of much anti-Semitism.

Furthermore, it is the responsibility of every Christian, when we tell the story of Jesus, to remember that two thousand years of history have now passed between the original story and our telling it. Mel Gibson has used some of that intervening history (and legend) himself. We could use the creative imagination of faith, too, to tell our story of Jesus. We would do well to remember that much of that intervening history has been sinful, maybe even well-intentioned sin. We cannot tell the Christian story today without recognizing and condemning anti-Semitism, while also trying to heal it.

Mel Gibson's movie is accurate to a particular style of Christianity and a particular image of Jesus Christ. There is nothing wrong with that. In retrospect, we can make the same claim about previous movies about Jesus. The movie (and play) "Godspell" was the flower children's image of Jesus. "Jesus Christ Superstar" was the rock musician's portrayal of Jesus. In one of the most stunning portrayals of Jesus ("The Gospel According to St. Matthew, 1964), the socialist Pasolini managed to portray Jesus as a marxist (that version, by the way, uses dialogue which is completely faithful to the literal words of scripture).

The lens through which Mel Gibson focuses on Jesus of Nazareth is a lens of violence and blood. Mel Gibson, already known for violence in his films, understands his faith through the same lens. Even so, the frequent words of forgiveness coming from Jesus, throughout the movie, should be a powerful antidote. Even if the film provides no context for why Jesus is being abused, we do have the repeated image of an innocent man being brutalized and yet speaking forgiveness over and over again. That may be a simple enough message: Jesus forgives.

The initial popularity of "The Passion of the Christ" should also tell us something about us, the contemporary movie audience who is already so saturated with graphic violence in our films. Sadly, we are accustomed to this dramatic,

exaggerated, and slow-motion violence in our films; some cynics even say we must need it in order to be entertained. Such entertainment is dangerous indeed.

In terms of volume, the graphic violence portrayed in "The Passion of the Christ" wins. One reviewer (Roger Ebert) has noted that 100 minutes of the 126 minute film are violent. However, this is not the way the Christian gospels finally were written. Sure, the writers had passion accounts to include; but they included much, much more in their stories. Compared to Gibson's telling of the story, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John show amazing restraint-perhaps even graceful restraint.

In the final analysis, I hope that the grace of the four gospel accounts wins. I hope that moviegoers exposed to violence will hear the repeated words of forgiveness on the lips of Jesus. I hope that we note one of the most effective images in Gibson's film - the large teardrop that falls from heaven at the moment of Jesus's death. Even God weeps at the violence of humanity. But the way that God's creative imagination tells the story, it is grace that wins.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Rev. Sam Candler