

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST:

PRE-VIEWING REFLECTIONS

LENT 2008

Fr. Dominique Peridans

As a scriptural backdrop to “The Passion of the Christ”, I propose what is sometimes called “Song of Suffering Servant”, a passage from the prophet Isaiah (52:13-53:12) that our Tradition believes to speak prophetically of the Christ, in whom it is fulfilled. Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends”. (John 15:13-14). Although the amount of graphic violence can perhaps be discussed, “The Passion of the Christ” seeks to portray this Suffering Servant in the gift of himself the last twelve hours of his life on earth. Keeping in mind that Christ lays down His life of His own volition, His own accord, and is not a victim of circumstance, the film can serve as a springboard to greater awareness of divine love.

Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted.

**Even as many were amazed at him – so marred was his look beyond that of man,
and his appearance beyond that of mortals.**

**So shall he startle many nations, because of him kings shall stand speechless;
for those who have not been told shall see, those who have not heard shall ponder it.**

**Who would believe what we have heard?
To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?**

**He grew like a sapling before him, like a shoot from the parched earth;
there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him,
nor appearance that would attract us to him.**

**He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity,
one of those from whom men hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem.**

**Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured,
while we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted.**

**But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins,
upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed.**

**We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way;
but the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all.**

**Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth;
like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers,
he was silent and opened not his mouth.**

**Oppressed and condemned, he was taken away,
and who would have thought any more of his destiny?
When he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of his people.**

**A grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers,
though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood.**

**(But the LORD was pleased to crush him in infirmity.)
If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life,
and the will of the LORD shall be accomplished through him.**

**Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days;
through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.**

**Therefore I will give him his portion among the great,
and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty,
because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked;
and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.**

Christ's Real Passion was Life

JAMES CARROLL

Jerusalem

Appeared in the Boston Globe February 10, 2004

[James Carroll was born in Chicago in 1943 and raised in Washington, D.C. He attended Georgetown University before entering the Paulist Fathers' seminary. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1969. Carroll served as Catholic chaplain at Boston University from 1969 to 1974. During that time, he studied poetry with George Starbuck and published books on religious subjects and a book of poems. Carroll left the priesthood to become a writer, and in 1974 was a playwright-in-residence at the Berkshire Theater Festival. He has written for numerous publications, including THE NEW YORKER, and his op-ed column appears weekly in the BOSTON GLOBE. He won a National Book Award for AN AMERICAN REQUIEM. James Carroll lives in Boston with his wife, the novelist Alexandra Marshall, and their two children.]

CAN A PIOUS Christian make too much of the passion of the Christ? Can the suffering of Jesus be remembered as too bloody? Or too unique, for that matter? Can the crucifixion be made too central to Christian faith? Indeed, can that faith be distorted by an overemphasis on blood and cruelty into a perversion of the message Jesus preached -- or even into a source of new cruelty? These are questions in my mind as I sit outside the small chapel that marks the place where Jesus died. Sensational news stories and a clever publicity campaign lead me to associate Golgotha with Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ." I am aware of the danger of prejudgment, having not seen the film, yet Gibson's many comments and selective screenings

of excerpts, which I have seen, are enough to have me thinking of it here. The possibility that the film levels the old "Christ-killer" charge against Jews prompted my first concern.

But an afternoon's meditation at the place where Christians have remembered the death of Jesus for 1,600 years raises the question of whether we have more broadly misused that memory. This shrine memorializing Golgotha is, in fact, a kind of side chapel in a much larger church that gives overwhelming emphasis to the memory of Jesus being raised from the dead. One sees that in the fact that the church is called the Holy Sepulcher by Latin Christians, indicating the tomb, not the execution place, and even more in the fact that Eastern Orthodox Christians call it the Church of the Resurrection. A celebration of the joy of resurrection trumps the grief of crucifixion in every way here.

In the first centuries of the church, the bloody crucifixion had little hold on the religious imagination of Christians. Scratched on the walls of the ancient catacombs, for example, one finds drawings of the communion cup, the loaf of bread, the fish -- but rarely if ever the cross.

Early Christians revered the death of Jesus, of course, but they evoked it metaphorically, not literally, more with the image of going down into the waters of baptism than with nails and blood. The cross comes into the center of Christian symbolism only in the fourth century, with Constantine and his mother, Helena, who is remembered as having discovered it here, only yards from where I sit. But even then, the cross was taken more as a token of resurrection than of brutal death.

It was only in the medieval period that the Latin church began to put the violent death of Jesus at the center of faith, but that theology was tied to a broader cultural obsession with death related to plagues, millennialism, and the carnage of the Crusades. Grotesquely literal renditions of the crucifixion came into art only as self-flagellation and other "mortifications" came into devotion. Good Friday began to replace Easter as the high point of the liturgical year. And God came to be understood as so cruel as to will his son's agonizing death as the only way to "atone" for the sins of fallen humanity.

Such is the piety into which many Christians, including Catholics of my generation, were born. From all reports, it is the piety on display in Mel Gibson's movie. But in nothing have the reforms of the Second Vatican Council been more significant than in a rejection of that piety and a return of the Resurrection to the center of faith. That is why, in the Catholic Church, white vestments replaced black at funeral services, why Easter rites have been reemphasized, why the cross itself, in church architecture, is downplayed.

All of this is to say that death was not the purpose of Jesus' life but only one part of a story that stretches from incarnation at Bethlehem to life as a Jew in Nazareth to preaching in Galilee to a courageous challenge to Roman imperialism in Jerusalem to permanent faith in the God of Israel whose promise is fulfilled in resurrection. In this full context, the death of Jesus can be seen as a full signal of his humanity -- and more.

In being crucified, Jesus was not uniquely singled out for the most extreme suffering ever inflicted but was joined to thousands of his fellow Jews who said no to Rome -- and who suffered similarly for it.

Leaving aside questions of taste, or even of prurience in displays of graphic violence, any rendition of the death of Jesus that attributes sacred meaning to suffering or cruelty to "God's

will," not to mention special guilt to Jews, is a betrayal of the real passions of Christ -- which were for truth, for love, and for life. Life, as he put it, to the full.

A response to James Carroll's "Christ's Real Passion was life"

DOMINIQUE PERIDANS

Let me begin by attempting to answer, for myself, the questions with which James Carroll opens his article, and, from there, develop a few thoughts.

Can a pious Christian make *too* much of the passion of Christ?

Of course. It is important to nuance, however.

Can the suffering of Christ be remembered as *too* bloody?

It can always be portrayed as too bloody (and perhaps the film does cross that line...). But, it was horrifically bloody (one need but read the prophetic passage on the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 52:13-53:12...), and that can not be ignored. What can certainly also occur is that the bloodiness not be sufficiently seen with eyes of faith, whereby one discerns that, beyond, and even through, the blood, somehow, there is something more, there is love. Divine love is poured forth...

Can the Crucifixion be made *too* central to Christian faith?

No, it *is* central. What can occur is that, thanks to this unfortunate "either-or" mentality of ours, it be separated from the Resurrection. The two are *inseparable*. It is neither the Passion/Death over the Resurrection, or the reverse. In a sense, a deeper sense, they are one mystery: the victory of divine love over that which normally stops love, i.e., suffering and death.

When one looks at the Scriptures, and considers what has been most constant in the Christian Tradition, the salvation story is a very simple one. It goes as follows:

There was, at some point, a grave tear in the relationship between humanity and the Creator, resulting in mysterious effects, namely suffering and death, unknown to humanity prior to the disruption. Out of tremendous love, the Creator, in the second person of the Trinity, becomes human, is made flesh. Indeed, only God can mend the tear. Why? A tear with Someone who is infinite has infinite repercussions. Hence, only Someone who is infinite can mend the tear.

The occasion for the Incarnation (and that to which it leads, namely, Passion/Death/Resurrection) is the "Fall". The truest, most proper reason for the Incarnation is the reality of God who is love, which, by nature, is self-communicative, i.e., radiates. For suffering and death to be "emptied" so to speak, for their opaqueness to be removed, for God thenceforth to indwell human suffering and open death onto life, it was fitting that the God-man, the Christ, should suffer and die. Suffering and death are thus fully in the hands of Love.

Why God did not simply eliminate suffering and death is an entirely other question, one that is challenging to answer... But it is important not to relegate to the back row the suffering

and death of the Christ: firstly because, in so doing, one disregards the Scriptures themselves, and secondly because one frankly eliminates the only intelligibility and hope there is to human suffering and death, which otherwise are truly folly and scandal.

James Carroll tends to look primarily to history in his explanation of the place given in the Christian tradition to the suffering and death of the Christ. Could the “late” appearance in Christian art of related imagery perhaps be due to the fact that it takes time to consider the horror of the Passion in relation to/in the light of something much deeper? It is easy to think that the Resurrection is the victory over the Cross. (“End of story. Alleluia. Thank you very much.”) Many Christians nowadays have this perspective. Such a perspective, however, fails to go beyond that of historical event. What is important is to grasp the “something more” that is occurring. Exteriorly speaking, the suffering and death are a failure. But perhaps a sublime love is being communicated (which, of course, make suffering and death, *in and of themselves*, no less horrible).

Could it be, however, that, over time, the Church came to understand that the victory is *at the Cross*, a victory made manifest in the Resurrection? This perspective is very different, and not easily grasped. The victory is at the Cross, because *there* Christ loves. Not only does His suffering and death not keep Him from loving, but, somehow, as unbelievable as it may seem, He is making active use of them to love more, to love supremely. He Himself suggests it: “No greater love has a man than to lay down his life for his friends.”

And such loving cannot but lead to the Resurrection. It is a mystery of *love*. It is a labor of love. The other perspective (Resurrection as victory over Passion/Death) considers it to be primarily a mystery of *power*. This perspective is indeed very different. And the consequences of such a perspective for how one understands suffering are different.

This understanding of the suffering and death of the Christ, of course, does not eliminate liturgical abuses, and even strange “devotions” by certain groups of people. But they are *another* question. Mr. Carroll fails to grasp well the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. It is true that great emphasis is placed on the Resurrection, but not to the “rejection of that piety”, i.e., the Cross, as he puts it. His statement is another example of “either-or” mentality that is so prevalent nowadays. The Resurrection is placed *with the Cross*, as the finale of love. Again, at a deeper level, the two are inseparable.

As Mr. Carroll states, Christ’s true passion was love. *Indeed*. The question is “*How did Christ love?* The film seeks to show how Christ loved *during the last twelve hours of His life*. Mr. Gibson deliberately stays within these parameters. It is true that not all (supposedly) Christian art succeeds in depicting the Crucifixion well. It is a unique artistic challenge to try to portray the Crucifixion in such a way that whoever “participates” in the piece not stop at the suffering but see beyond it. All in all, the film succeeds fairly well. Christ’s Passion is *how He loved*, during the last twelve hours of His life. And these hours, these events are, in a sense, a culmination. Why a culmination? Because He pours forth Himself even more. And yet, even these acts do not exhaust the love. Hence, as some have *spiritually* understood Christ’s cry of thirst: “I thirst” *to love you even more than this can express*. True, one may argue certain historical details, and the extra-Biblical details, but, nevertheless, the film seeks to show the love. Most sensitive, open minds will discern it.

Mr. Carroll’s closing statements, in particular, that “any rendition of the death of Jesus that attributes sacred meaning to suffering or cruelty to God’s will... is a betrayal of the real

passions of Christ” is, theologically, rather weak. One *must* attribute sacred meaning to the suffering of Christ, for it is the suffering of the Sacred One, Who, in suffering, opens all suffering to the intimate presence of God. Christ endured suffering, placing it “in God”, so to speak. As for God’s will, we must avoid being too simplistic. God’s will cannot be understood such that we conclude that God is sadistic. The fact is that Christ died. Where is God in all that? Mr. Carroll never seems to get beyond the insanity of suffering (to an extent, understandably so), and consequently offers no understanding of how the Passion relates to God. He simply divorces the two. What then becomes of such passages from Christian revelation as: “For God so loved the world that *He gave* his only begotten Son”?

If anything, Mr. Gibson ought to be commended for daring to tackle such difficult subject-matter. His film is a daring cinematic endeavor. It is not a perfect work, but it seems that, for the most part, he succeeds in transmitting, through the horror of Christ’s suffering, presented with grave realism, a love that knows no bounds.

Christ’s real passion *was* life, *everlasting* life. However, we must, once again, avoid falling into “either-or” thinking, i.e. that everlasting life disregards our life here. Christ cares about *every detail* of our lives. He cares about families, and the environment, and art, all that is part of our life. Christ did not need to suffer. But it made sense, if anything, because “no greater love has a person than to lay down his life for those he loves”. This love embraces everything.

Thoughts from a Hollywood Producer

ADRIENNE GRUBEN

(Co-producer of *Sister Act*, *Mothman Prophecies*, and other films)

Some of the cinematography was stunning. The blue smoke in the garden was remarkable. The performances, especially when there was no dialogue, were like something I have never seen. The emotion that was conveyed non-verbally by Jesus, obviously, but also especially by Satan, Pontius Pilate, and Mary, were the emotional centers of the film. I understood Satan’s agenda, Pontius Pilate’s doubts, and Mary’s resignation solely from their facial expressions. My only issue was the amount of violence, and not from a moral, or ethical standpoint. From a structural standpoint, I think it left the realm of truth-telling and entered the realm of indulgent. If you are trying to convey the way something really was, bringing “over the top” distracts it from story telling and eases it into the realm of violence for violence’s sake. When you have fantastic cinematography, and awe-inspiring performances at your disposal, use them to further illustrate the stories of the bible, so that we can further understand the violence in context.

I think one of my favorite parts in general was the presence of Satan to illustrate doubt within each character. For a moment you know that doubt is challenging Jesus, as well as Mary as she watches her son suffer over and over again. This was an ingenious structural device.

Overall, I was moved by many elements, but found myself saying “OK, I get it” about the physical abuse. I am glad Gibson chose to show it, so that you understand more deeply the difficulty surrounding the choices some of the characters made, from Pilate’s regrets, to the woman who brings him water’s courage, to the compassion of the man who helped Jesus carry

the cross. But I thought it was too much. Regarding the Anti-Semitism claims, I didn't find it Anti-Semitic at all. I am not sure what the hoopla was about.

Thoughts from a Journalist

PHILIP LAWLER

Excerpt from "WHY I DON'T PLAN TO SEE GIBSON'S PASSION"
Catholic World Report

A depiction of Christ in agony will certainly rouse the emotions of even a lukewarm Christian, and many of my friends believe that this film could be a powerful tool of evangelization. But even powerful emotions fade quickly. Faith is formed in the cool light of reason and in the depths of the human heart, not the glare and heat of the emotions.

Finally, an emphasis on Christ's physical suffering might distract us from his moral suffering, caused by the betrayals, large and small, of sinners like you and me. We did not hammer the nails or swing the whips; that bloody work was done by soldiers who, our Lord reminds us, "know not what they do." You and I do know. Aren't our sins more painful than the lashes?

The physical violence of the Passion was an undeniable reality. Jesus was mercilessly tortured. I know that.

But I hesitate to dwell on it. Is this cowardice? I hope not. I notice that God, in his wisdom, arranged the affairs of that day so that 11 of the 12 apostles did not witness the violence. And the Gospels, our sure guide, are sparing in details.

There is a reason, I believe, for this decorous treatment of the Passion in Scripture. An individual's pain is a personal, even an intimate affair, which should not be exposed to public view. It is obscene to probe the details of another person's anguish, just as it is obscene to air the details of an act of love. And as we look toward Calvary, where history's greatest suffering was poured out in history's greatest act of love, we might do well to avert our eyes-not in denial of what assuredly took place, but in recognition that we are not prepared to bear it.

Enthusiasts say that Gibson's film enables us to participate in Christ's Passion. No! That is presumptuous. The viewer who watches a movie, from the comfort of a theater seat, is not experiencing the pain that he sees depicted. And keep in mind that what appears on the screen is not really the Passion; what the viewer actually sees is a cast of actors, playing roles.

But we can participate in the reality of Christ's Sacrifice-every day, if we wish. And I cannot help but notice that there is no gore, no physical violence, in the sacrament that Jesus gave us, saying, "Do this in memory of me."

Thoughts from two Professors

RUSSELL HITTINGER and ELIZABETH LEV

Excerpt from "GIBSON'S PASSION"
[Russell Hittinger is the William K. Warren Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tulsa. Elizabeth Lev teaches Christian art and architecture at Duquesne University's Rome campus.]

This emphasis on the role of Mary far outstrips what Pasolini or Zeffirelli was able to imagine. Where Zeffirelli's Mary, played by the hauntingly lovely Olivia Hussey, elicits *compassion*, Gibson's Mary provides comfort. Like the Eve who accompanies Adam in every scene in the Sistine Chapel vault, Mary, it seems, is always present in Gibson's *Passion*. Her face is the most reliable clue to the meaning of the unfolding events.

She is paralleled on screen by Satan, played by Rosalinda Celentano as a black-cowled, androgynous bystander. After the scourging, Satan holds a grotesque child in mockery of the old Adam, and also of Mary's eventual pietà. Then there is the remarkable confrontation in the film between Satan and Mary. As Jesus climbs towards Calvary, Satan glides through the crowd, feeding on the tangible wickedness in the air; Mary is on the other side of the road, trying to reach her son. She locks eyes with Satan, as determined as Satan is smug. Gibson's disturbing technique of filling the screen with Jesus' body, almost allowing him to tumble into our laps, is contained visually only by the fact that Mary constantly touches, holds, and comforts the corpus. We find ourselves thinking, "thank God someone else will keep this mess from falling onto us." To be sure, Gibson employs a *mélange* of different iconographic traditions; but no other film we have seen has so powerfully depicted the ecclesial and corporate Mary. When she approaches the cross and kisses the feet of Jesus, the camera closes in to show her lips covered with the blood of Christ—the bride inebriated with matrimonial wine.

But all of this makes Gibson's *Passion* nearly the opposite of the arcane and politically fraught tradition of the passion play. Such performances were often staged to incite the audience to choose sides, to "save" the integrity and honor of Christ by constituting a kind of party against Judas, the Jews, and the mob in Pilate's courtyard. Had Gibson used the power of film to give this twisted but all-too-human political stereotype a new lease on life, concerns about the film stirring up anti-Judaism or hostility against nonbelievers would be justified. To his credit, however, Gibson denies the audience any shred of political or religious triumph, or, for that matter, defeat. Even a viewer who already knows and religiously believes in the final outcome of the story must struggle to keep watching, which is humiliating in its own right. There might be reason for scholars and religious authorities to raise questions about Gibson's synthesizing of distinct scriptural accounts of the passion, or about his use of extra-biblical iconography. But it is hard to imagine anyone coming out of Gibson's movie with an appetite for a religiously politicized passion. If anything, this is the definitive post-passion-play passion.

Thoughts from an Archbishop

CHARLES CHAPUT

Archdiocese of Denver

The reason the secular world hates films like *The Passion of Christ* is because they persuade the heart with the logic of love. The reason the secular world seeks to reinvent or reinterpret Mary is because she's dangerous. She's the model of mature human character—a human being who co-creates a new world not through power, but through *unselfish* love, faith in God, and the rejection of power." He continued, "The genius of every woman is to *love*; to protect and nourish the lives entrusted to her; and to support the full development of life in others. It's the

same whether you're a mother, or a consecrated religious, or a woman who lives the single vocation." *The Passion* shows this genius in honesty, respect, and admiration.

Thoughts from an Author

JOHN ZMIRAK

Author of the first English-language biography of anti-Nazi activist and social philosopher Wilhelm Röpke.
Excerpt from "THE UNBEARABLE REALITY OF LOVE: THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"
GODSPY magazine
February 25, 2004

What turns us back to Christ? The film is rich with suggestions, with moving moments that demonstrate how Jesus is indeed the face of a loving God turned towards man. Gibson leaves out any flashbacks to Jesus' miracles—the very proofs of His divine authority, as He frequently asserted. No loaves and fishes multiply, no Lazarus rises, no blind men see. Instead, the wonders the film presents are more impressive—they amaze us with Jesus' power and willingness to forgive. We see Him rescue Mary Magdalene from a crowd of righteous Pharisees—who all too eagerly seek to enforce Mosaic law by stoning her. Wracked with torture which we share, crushed by mockery, and tempted to despair—He turns to Dismas, the penitent thief, and promises him, "This day you will be with me in my kingdom." And most astonishingly, He turns to the gloating Caiaphas, who taunts Him from the foot of the cross (with Satan lurking behind him, supportively), and looks directly at him as He delivers his final absolution: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This phrase utterly negates Caiaphas' hasty, callous curse, "Let his blood be upon us, and upon our children." (This controversial biblical statement reportedly made the final cut, but was not subtitled). Jesus refutes him, with divine authority; it is not guilt, but forgiveness, which will pour from the cross and descend through the ages.