

Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday

April 4th, 2004

Delivered at
Christ Episcopal Church
Sei Ko Kai

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Isaiah 45:21-25 / Psalm 22:1-11 / Philippians 2:5-11 / Luke 22:39-23:56

I was on the road to Santa Barbara several weeks ago when I stumbled across a Christian talk-show host extolling the virtues of Mel Gibson's movie version of the Passion. As I suppose I had more than an academic interest in the subject, I turned up the volume to discover that there was a phone call into Mel himself to discuss the film. I wondered if I myself should go see it, and wondered what he might have to say about all the controversy surrounding it.

The conversation began, melting into the trees along a rural, hilly stretch of 101. Mel was at one end of the discussion sounding, well, so old Catholic. He spoke matter-of-factly about how he believed that Jesus was executed to take away the sins of the world. How his suffering and the violence of the crucifixion was ordained by God. The talk-show host talked about his thrill of seeing the movie for the first time, at how much he felt *he* was responsible for the death of Jesus after seeing it. . .and how that somehow affirmed his devotion as a Christian. Many of our evangelical and fundamentalist brothers and sisters have been jumping up and down with excitement over the movie, and the talk-show host went to great lengths to congratulate Mel for bucking the Hollywood system and remaining "so close" to the true story.

There were parts of the discussion I found intriguing. Mel talked about the death of his mother, and how that inspired him to start a deep reading of the gospels. And he witnessed to the depths of his own faith, especially when the talk-show host started to verbally beat up on one of the critics of the film. Mel was quick to remind him that the maligned critic was also a child of God.

But at the end of the interview, I have to admit I found the whole conversation more than a little unsettling. So much of it was devoted to standard "substitutionary atonement" theology. About 900 years old, it's a classic science, if you will, about why Jesus had to die. And it comes through in our prayers, liturgy, and reading selections today and for the rest of Holy Week. But it has its problems. It claims that God required a sacrifice for the sins of the entire world. Our God of compassion, it says, required a blood debt from each of us for offending the divine honor. And so our God of compassion sends a Son to be that sacrifice in our place. Why a God of compassion would send an only child simply to die such a grisly and horrible death to pay back a debt in a system that God, being God, wove into the fabric of reality. . .well, that remains a bit puzzling to me. For us in the 21st century, we ought to be at least a little uncomfortable with the suggestion that God - whom we like to refer to as the ultimate parent - had to have Jesus, God's son, killed for a debt. Doesn't that smack of child abuse? More than that, the whole idea after a while seems to make this crucifixion - the one we recall year after year - a kind of comforting thought. Should it be?

And adding to my unsettled state that day on 101, heading to Santa Barbara, was the reason I was on the road in the first place. I was gathering with some friends to meet the District Attorney who was handling

James Tramel's case. James, as some of you may remember, has been in prison all of his adult life for a crime he was convicted of in his youth. James has studied atonement at the grass-roots level, if you will - in the very depths of his being. It's not film-making for him.

Jesus dies on the cross, yes, but did God pre-ordain that death? Or did people and their fascination with blood, violence, power, and corruption?

If the box office numbers are to be believed, very little has changed in that regard in the past 2,000 years. Yes, I've seen the film. And Mel captures the potency and pathos of the Passion brilliantly, complete with all the gratuitous violence - the blood, guts, and gore. But is that really so un-Hollywood? Or is this just another indication that we still love violence and a good show, just like the crowds in Jerusalem one fateful day in the first century. . . Or just as the Romans did, however coldly calculated were their motives? The cross for them equaled crowd control - a method of putting down rebellions, punishing criminals, frightening the general populace, and perhaps occasionally satiating their desire for the first-century equivalent of a "good movie," as we hear in today's narrative.

And I think we as Christians ought to be careful that we not revel too much in the passion story. Revelry I think ought to give way to a bit of sobriety in light of this foundational story of our faith. Suffering is still rampant in the world. People continue to die for the sake of Jesus' Gospel. Even non-Christians do. And innocents still languish in the face of quests for power, domination, and control. That stuff is real. It's not Hollywood. (And, frankly, the fact that there is still suffering suggests to me that "substitutionary atonement" doesn't really work at the end of the day. If God was indeed "satisfied" by Jesus' sacrifice, why then must we continue to struggle and suffer?)

Today's story of the passion is indeed about suffering, but I'm not quite ready to say that it was God's will that it had to happen. No, I take a slightly different tack - one that comes through to me even more clearly. You can find it in the ancient understandings of our Christian tradition. And it, too, seeps into our readings, theology, and prayers today. And if you look for it, you'll find it in Mel's movie as well. I think it's about God in Christ confronting and succumbing to the terrible evils of the world: the evils found in our insatiable desire for control and in our inordinate love to protect the power we have over others.

And Jesus shows us today that such things kill compassion, generosity, and genuine humanity. . .as well as the divinity born in God's Son, and maybe in all of us, God's children. The incarnate Word God tries to write again and again onto our hearts and into our lives - I, for one, believe God is too busy with that project to have ever been keeping a scorecard and wondering how much blood and horror it would take to make up for our sins.

The question remaining then is whether or not God succeeds at this mission. . . whether or not the world is really saved by divine grace. The answer to that is left until. . .well, next week.

But a question for us today is where we fit into this cosmic narrative of Jesus' passion. Where is Jesus confronting evil and dying for the love for each of us, and all of us together as a community? That's a question I want to leave with you to ponder this Holy Week. It's our last leg of Lent - the hardest part of the journey - as we confront our mortality and vulnerability, and how fragile the life of compassion, truth, and justice - the life of Christ's Gospel - really is. And that nagging doubt if we would be able to follow in Jesus steps. If that Gospel is one really worth dying for.