

FOCUS ON FAITH

PASSION OR COMPASSION?

By now some of you reading this article may have been to see Mel Gibson's new film, "The Passion of the Christ". A few weeks ago, along with around 1,000 other church leaders, I watched the film in Birmingham as part of a nationwide tour organised by a Christian radio station. In the past some church leaders have been known to talk about (and sometimes criticise) things we've either not experienced or not seen. But this event had been laid on so that we could watch the film for ourselves and be aware of both the content and the potential impact it is likely to have on people.

Yes, it is graphic, bloody and, in places, horrific. The violence is disturbing but whilst many of the scenes are gruesome, in many ways the film is compelling – I found myself not wanting to watch but not able to turn away. The film captures in vivid, technicolour close-up, the horrific cruelty that human beings can hand out to other human beings. It also exposes the attitudes and prejudices that may lie latent in any one of us but which could surface given the right (or should I say, wrong?) circumstances.

Easter is not just about death but about the fact that Jesus rose again

Whichever way you look at it, people who see this film will be impacted. Some may ignore it but others may be traumatised by the way in which the Roman soldiers are portrayed going about their duties with apparent sadistic enjoyment. Some may be shocked by the apparent duplicity and

expediency of the Jewish leaders whilst others will be concerned about the cruelty that is depicted. Roman scourging of prisoners was barbaric and crucifixion was probably the most painful method of execution ever devised. I know I'll never be able to celebrate Communion again without this film's images coming flooding back into my mind.

Easter – the time of remembering the passion of the Christ. We often talk of passion in terms of emotions and say things like, "He made a passionate speech on equality or injustice". We use the word in terms of a passionate affair or relationship and even in respect of being passionate about a football team or a favourite food or drink. But passion is much more about suffering – the word originates from the Greek word "patho" which literally means "to suffer". Jesus' death was real enough – whether you believe the Bible or not there are enough historical records that testify to what happened – and he certainly suffered, physically and mentally. The prophet Isaiah writing over 400 years before Jesus was born said about his death that, "his appearance would be marred beyond human likeness" and that he would be "a man of sorrows".

So what was the reason that Jesus went through this? Jesus never claimed to be a good man or an eloquent and knowledgeable teacher; he claimed to be God's Son. That was the only charge the Jewish leaders could pin on him and it was for that he was executed. Now whenever anyone claims deity you basically have three options to choose from. They are either trying to deceive you; they are deluded or it's for real. Christians obviously believe in the third option – that Jesus is God's Son and that the reason he was prepared to endure the passion of the cross was his compassion – his love – for us.

However, unlike Mel Gibson's film, the story doesn't end on the cross. Easter is not just about death but about the fact that Jesus rose again (perhaps that will be the sequel!). If the story ended with just a sacrifice there would be no hope and the Christian message of Easter is that there is hope. Hope for the present and for the future that's not based on wishful thinking or having an eternal insurance policy just in case, but real hope that enables us to be released from the past, to face the future with confidence and live in the present with the same kind of love (compassion) that Jesus had.

For Christians, Easter is more than a couple of extra bank holidays in early spring to get away for a few days' break or to cut the lawns and start making the garden look a little less like a jungle. It's a time of reflection and in one sense, celebration – not of a death but of a resurrected and eternal life. The Apostle Paul says that there are three things that remain – faith, hope and love. We need faith to believe in God; hope to sustain our faith and love that demonstrates our faith. Paul says the greatest of these three attributes is love. Jesus paid the ultimate price for us because of his love for us. His passion was born out of his compassion.

If you do go to see the film and it raises questions you'd like answers to, many of the Christian churches in the area have a short booklet that may help. It's called "The Passion of the Christ – True or False?" To obtain a copy, call 01746 767531. Alternatively go along to a church Easter Service and find out more about the compassion that led to passion.



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