

The Foolishness of the Cross and 'The Passion of the Christ'

“He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Is.53:5). Thus begins Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*. After you watch the movie you will never read those words in the same way again. Nor will you likely read the crucifixion accounts in the same way. Perhaps also lines in various hymns will take on new meaning. That is what happened to me. After seeing the movie, the words “Alas and did my Saviour bleed” and “He groaned upon the tree” stood out in bold relief. The memorable scene where the crown of thorns is forcefully crunched down on the head of Jesus, and the blood drops in slow motion, made the words “I love Thee for wearing the thorns on my brow” (from the song “My Jesus I love Thee”) come alive in a new way.

The reason these words come to us with fresh relevance is because the movie does what all good art should do: it gives us images, symbols, and pictures that deepen our insight into the world. Gibson has given us some powerful images to deepen our insight into the crucifixion. Indeed those images will deepen our insight into the very gospel. The gospel is about events which happened. It is not as if the theological meaning of those events is what matters and the event itself is less important. Central to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel is the very event itself. God was acting in history. So if the movie gives us new understanding of those events it gives fresh insight into the gospel itself.

In this brief reflection I want to focus on one theme that Gibson’s movie will help us understand. This is something that all early Christians would have understood well, something the early church would have felt deeply in their very ‘guts’ as it were. Christians living in the Roman empire would have experienced an unbearable tension, a profound contradiction between the horrific brutality and shame of the cross, and their confession of the cross as the mightiest act of God in human history. On the one hand, they understood the barbaric cruelty and savage brutality that characterised crucifixion in the Roman Empire. On the other hand, they confessed that the cross was the fullest revelation of God’s glory (John) and the centre of world history (Luke-Acts). How is it possible to witness the repugnance and gruesome torture of a Roman crucifixion *and at the same time* confess that in this event God has accomplished the salvation of

the entire creation? What absurdity!

This is the tension that Paul describes in I Corinthians 1:18-2:5: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” These are words that arise out of twenty years of missionary activity. Paul had proclaimed the cross throughout the Roman Empire and had heard the taunts and ridicule of Jew and Gentile. He had heard Gentiles deride his proclamation as utter foolishness (cf. Acts 26:24). Perhaps a better translation here is complete absurdity, absolute madness, utter stupidity. The cross as the central act of God – what folly! He had heard Jews mock and oppose his proclamation of the cross.

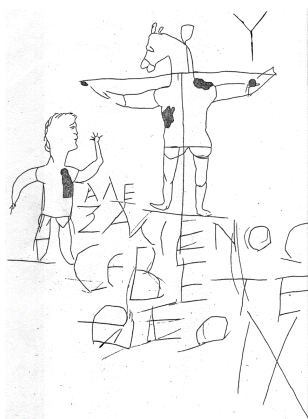
‘Crucified messiah’ is an oxymoron, a blatant contradiction. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* states: “No Messiah that Jews could recognize could suffer such a death; for ‘he that is hanged is accursed by God’ (Deut. 31:23)”. The Jew of Paul’s day would have felt the same.

The reason why Jew and Gentile simply could not accept the cross as God’s mighty act is because they knew well the brutality, the degradation, the horror of the cross. Perhaps it is difficult for us living 2000 years after the fact to comprehend just how ghastly and loathsome the cross really was for the Roman citizen; it was a horrific and brutal affair. As Martin Hengel puts it in his classic book on crucifixion in the Roman Empire, the cross was “an utterly offensive affair, ‘obscene’ in the original sense of the word.” The cross was a gruesome business and utterly abhorrent to the Roman citizen. Cicero says that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.” Roman citizens were not crucified; crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals.

Crucifixion was a horrifying and grisly way to torture and kill a victim. The Roman Empire had perfected crucifixion as the ultimate execution. The physical suffering and pain was drawn out and maximized. Death came slowly and the victim was utterly degraded in the process. The extreme pain, drawn out over many hours, even days, exacerbated by the shame of hanging naked and suffering the jeers and taunts of enemies made crucifixion an utterly revolting and eminently cruel event. Crucifixion was supreme torture and ultimate humiliation. For the Roman citizen the cross signified shame and agony. Josephus calls crucifixion “the most wretched of deaths” and Cicero simply “that plague.”

Consequently unbelievers found the Christian confession absurd. They heaped ridicule on the Christian message. They called it a “sick delusion,” a “senseless and crazy superstition,” a “perverse and extravagant superstition,” a “perverse superstition,” and a “monstrosity.” Caecilius, an early opponent of Christianity, says “To say that their ceremonies centre on a man put to death for his crime and on the fatal wood of the cross is to assign to these abandoned wretches sanctuaries which are appropriate to them and the kind of worship they deserve.”

A Roman graffito from 225 A.D. gives us a window into the mockery early Christians endured. It is a picture of a stupid ass nailed to a cross. Beneath the sketch are the words “Alexamenos worships his god.” It is a cartoon likely drawn by one slave to taunt another who is a Christian. In fact many educated Christians of the first centuries struggled to affirm the cross in its naked historical reality. Yet in the face of such ridicule Paul made bold to proclaim the cross as the power and wisdom of God. Not weakness, power! Not foolishness, wisdom – to those who are being saved.



How could anyone ever believe such a proclamation? Only if they saw a community that believed and embodied it. Only if they saw a community where the power that flowed from the cross was evident in transformed lives. And that is just what happened in the first three centuries of the church’s life.

So what about Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*? I suggest that the movie will give us a fresh set of images that will enable us to sense in a small way the utter brutality of the cross. As I

sat through the film the question kept pounding away: ‘Could this be the mightiest act of God? Could this really be the fullest revelation of God’s glory?’ Those questions lead me to a deepening affirmation, and fuller appreciation of the gospel. At a time when the cross has been whitewashed, and is often no more than a theological cipher or a sentimental symbol, Gibson’s movie is a wake-up call to its cold historical and cruel reality.

It has been charged that the movie is more brutal than the original events themselves. I would aver the exact opposite. Gibson has not exposed us to the naked terror of a Roman flogging. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea describes the Roman scourging and says that the sufferer’s “veins were laid bare, and that the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.” That kind of brutality was not portrayed in the movie. Moreover, mercifully a loin cloth remains in place throughout the ordeal – an unlikely scenario. Neither is the full cruelty of Roman soldiers at the site of a crucifixion given full expression. The brutality portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ* does not reach the levels described by Roman authors of the first centuries A.D. Perhaps Gibson knew how far he could take us, how much brutality we could stomach.

Not only does this movie offer the believer images to deepen their understanding of the gospel, it also offers a fresh evangelistic opportunity. Gibson has given our culture some new pictures that will cry out for interpretation. Sitting behind us in the theatre were two fellows. To our annoyance, one continually explained each event to the other. In our neo-pagan culture an opportunity presents itself to give an interpretation to these graphic portrayals of violence.

But when we proclaim the cross we better have no delusions. The cross is no more palatable today than then. Today our contemporaries do not understand the horror of the cross in the same way as those to whom Paul spoke. Rather the cross is an old religious symbol of a bygone era, a symbol which may take its place alongside of the Muslim crescent. The cross is one more misunderstood option in the supermarket of religious consumers. The message that in the cross God has acted for the salvation of the entire world, and is therefore universally valid, true for all, is as contemptible for today’s pluralism as it was for the Roman citizen so long ago. Perhaps Gibson’s movie will raise nostalgia or even admiration for the amazing sacrifice of Christianity’s founder. But to allow the events of this movie to be reduced to this would be to betray the cross.

The cross is public truth, God's way of accomplishing the renewal of the all peoples and the whole creation.

How can any contemporary western person steeped in pluralism accept the message of the cross as God's mighty redemptive act? How can anyone understand the significance of the events of Gibson's movie? Only if there is a community who believes it and embodies its power.

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