

## THE PASSION IS UPON US

A Sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life  
University Public Worship, Stanford Memorial Church  
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The Passion is upon us. It's the third Sunday in Lent and this week's gospel reading in the Christian lectionary<sup>i</sup> takes us into the last twenty-four hours of Jesus' life -- a period commonly referred to as his Passion.<sup>ii</sup> During this particular supper with his disciples, as we're told by John, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father." During this year's Lenten season the Passion is also upon us in the form of a movie by producer, director and actor Mel Gibson. It's hard to go anywhere these days without hearing something about "The Passion of the Christ." How can today's gospel lesson illuminate the Passion for us? And how can the Passion be upon us in a constructive, transformational sense, and not just as an argument about a recent movie?

My suggestion is that the biblical Passion is really about an infinitely loving God who transforms the inevitable sin and suffering of human life through a very personal presence with us in our pain. The Buddhist tradition tells us in the first of its Four Noble Truths that "all life is suffering." The Christian tradition also seems to put suffering at the very center of its theology and its iconography. Look at the central stained glass window here above the altar. An intensely painful, cruel public execution is depicted. The central symbol of Christianity is the cross -- an instrument of torture and death. Yet suffering is not the final word either for Buddhism or for Christianity. For Christians sitting here today, you need only look to the right of the crucified

Christ to see him resurrected and ascending.

Now, notice how in all three stained glass windows Jesus is surrounded by other people. Loving family and friends are with him at his birth, at his death, and at his ascension. Of course, this is the person who said that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>iii</sup> He even asked us to love our enemies,<sup>iv</sup> and to pray for those who persecute us.<sup>v</sup> Jesus' central message is one of love. Therefore, the Christian response to suffering should not be "Why me?" or "How could God let this happen," but "I'm grateful for God's loving presence with me in my suffering." For Christians, Jesus walks with us, holds us, and comforts us in our suffering. That's significantly because Jesus is no stranger to suffering himself, as we remind ourselves every time we look at the cross. He's capable of being fully with us, fully empathizing, fully caring. We are saved, finally, through infinite love.

But let's get back to the gospel lesson. It depicts Jesus, at his Last Supper, about to die, washing the feet of all his disciples -- including Judas who was to betray him and Peter who was to deny him. Foot washing at the time, for Jews and Romans, had three contexts: 1) personal hygiene, 2) hospitality, and 3) cultic significance. Hospitality, in this case, was likely the foremost reason for Jesus' action. In Israelite society, this was a way to welcome guests whose feet had become dusty on their journeys. The actual washing was usually done by guests themselves, or by a servant of the host. Hence, Jesus here is acting like a servant. He's providing a gift of service out of love for his disciples.<sup>vi</sup>

Peter is not happy, though, seeing Jesus in the role of a servant. He insists "You will never

wash my feet." Yet, Jesus responds that "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Seeing things in that light -- in the light of Jesus' love for him -- Peter then cries out, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head." Earlier in the passage from John, it's explained that "Having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end." And that's true regardless of how they were to treat him later, consistent with Jesus' teaching to love even one's enemies and pray for those who persecute one. The betrayer's feet were washed lovingly along with the denier's.

Jesus gives himself in love to his disciples, symbolized by washing their feet. Soon he's to give the ultimate gift of his life, also in love, to his executioners, with these words on his lips: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."<sup>vii</sup> Jesus lived a life of radical love, which included raising questions of justice for the oppressed and always putting the spirit of the law ahead of the letter of the law. He stood with the poor and the sick, with adulterers and tax collectors. He taught that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>viii</sup> And lay down his life he did, in great suffering, which we call the Passion.

Mel Gibson's film poignantly recounts the foot washing at the Last Supper, as he does Jesus' protection of the adulterous woman from stoning. Yet these are in brief flashbacks. The vast majority of his movie depicts Jesus' Passion -- his torture and death. He does so in such gory and excruciating detail that I found myself wanting to vomit in the theater and warning my wife against seeing the movie herself. Yet, the Passion is upon us. Are we to be present to Jesus' footwashing but not to his bloody flaying and execution?

One evangelical Christian commentator has put it this way: "On more than one occasion as I

watched this movie, I had to turn away from the screen. I remember thinking at one point, 'Enough. This is over the top.' And almost immediately I had a second thought, 'That's right,' I thought. 'This is over the top, because the death of Christ was, in reality, barbaric and violent.' Maybe what we all need to see is not a cleaned up, sanitized Hollywood version of His death, but a more accurate and graphic look at how He suffered for us."<sup>ix</sup>

I don't actually think we all need to see this movie. I definitely don't think children need to see it, and I'm appalled that parents are taking young school-aged children to this R-rated film. We have ratings for a reason. And for adults, like having a good novel ruined by a Hollywood adaptation, there's a risk of this graphic portrayal skewing our understanding of the crucifixion, taking it out of the context of the larger story of Jesus' earthly life and teachings and his resurrected presence for us since.

Remember also the liturgical life of the church. Holy Week or Passion Week is but one week of the church year -- albeit a very important one. I suggest active prayer and meditation during that week, including contemplation of the cross -- and not just skipping lightly from Palm Sunday to Easter. One's own spiritual disciplines during that week, and worshipping together as a community on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, may well be much deeper and more sustaining than Mel Gibson's interpretation of Christ's last hours on the screen.

There's another major problem with Mel Gibson's *Passion*. As explained by Dennis Prager, the first practicing Jew that Gibson invited to see the movie, almost a year ago now, Christians and Jews see two entirely different films when they go to [The Passion of the Christ](#): "For two hours Christians watch their Savior tortured and killed. For the same two hours, Jews watch

Jews arrange the killing and torture of the Christians' Savior." Jews see Jewish authorities and a Jewish mob manipulate the Roman overlords, portrayed in the person of Pontius Pilate as morally far more elevated than those Jews before him, "into torturing and murdering a beautiful man."<sup>x</sup>

Why does this bother so many Jews so much as they watch Gibson's film? Because, as Prager puts it, for nearly 2,000 years, attacked as 'Christ killers," countless Jewish men, women and children were not only tortured and murdered themselves, but saw their families and friends raped tortured and murdered. It is not paranoid to worry that "a major movie made by one of the world's superstars [which] depicts Jews as having Christ tortured and killed might arouse anti-Semitic passions."<sup>xi</sup>

Prager goes on to explain why it is essential that Christians understand this: "Every Jew, secular, religious, assimilated, left-wing, right-wing, fears being killed because he [or she] is Jewish. This is the best-kept secret about Jews, who are widely perceived as inordinately secure and powerful. But it is the only universally held sentiment among Jews."<sup>xii</sup>

On the other hand, American Christians, especially those born after Vatican II condemned Passion-related anti-Semitism in the early 1960's, generally see a very different movie. Jews are not the villains in the passion story. Jesus was killed by a sinning humanity, in effect by each and every one of us, rather than by "the Jews," not to mention that it was a divine plan in the first place: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."<sup>xiii</sup>

Moreover, many Christians see a different movie because they feel that their tradition has been bashed for decades in movies and art, not to mention the demise of the Christmas party and

the intellectual denigration of conservative Christians. Finally, here is a mainstream film which has a sympathetic, compelling Jesus as its central figure. And it doesn't help that "many Jewish groups and media people now attacking 'The Passion' have a history of irresponsibly labeling conservative Christians anti-Semitic." So this film requires a lot of goodwill on the part of both Christians and Jews working hard on understanding what film the other is watching.<sup>xiv</sup>

This brings me back to the Passion's significance as the ultimate example of self-giving love. Surely Jesus would want his sacrifice to bring humanity together, not to divide Christians and Jews and anyone else. When asked to illustrate what he meant by loving one's neighbor as oneself, Jesus took as his exemplar of a good neighbor one of the hated outsider peoples of his day, the Samaritans.<sup>xv</sup> Similarly, Jesus breaks the social code of his day by speaking with a Samaritan woman near Jacob's well.<sup>xvi</sup>

But even if Christians and Jews could see eye to eye, isn't it still a very hard sell to see Jesus' bloody crucifixion as having anything to do with love? I don't think so, when we remember that Jesus had plenty of opportunities to leave Jerusalem when things began to turn against him and go back to Galilee where he was appreciated. In the Garden of Gethsemene, he began to pray to God to spare his life, but then came to accept that he must do what God wanted, not what he wanted.<sup>xvii</sup> When his disciples started to defend him against arrest with their swords, he insisted on nonviolence, healing the ear of the high priest's slave which had been sliced off and saying "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."<sup>xviii</sup> He showed his love even on the cross as he asked that his tormenters be forgiven, and as he comforted a criminal being crucified beside him by saying "Today you will be with me in Paradise."<sup>xix</sup>

Jesus understood that his loving commitment to bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives and letting the oppressed go free,<sup>xx</sup> was radical. He understood that his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as a king, as the Son of David,<sup>xxi</sup> was threatening to both religious and imperial authorities. Yet, he moved on, blessing a poor widow who contributed two small copper coins to the temple treasury -- at the same time condemning scribes who devour widow's houses while saying long prayers for the sake of appearance.<sup>xxii</sup> He asked that the hungry be fed, the stranger be welcomed, and the sick be taken care of.<sup>xxiii</sup>

And then, for all his loving concern, he's crucified. He's willing to suffer and die for his vision of a humanity reconciled, for humanity at one -- literally "atoned for." Those who suffer can see their great comforter suffering unto death himself. An infinitely loving God, through Jesus, transforms the sinfulness and pain of life by experiencing it all himself, and then as the resurrected Christ by being with us always in the midst of our own suffering. Mel Gibson has said that in over 12 years of meditating on the passion and death of Jesus, the wounds of Christ have healed his own wounds.<sup>xxiv</sup> Despite any cynicism I may have about the producer and director of a movie grossing in the hundreds of millions of dollars, I find that statement of faith compelling.

So, may we be grateful that the Passion is upon us. May we who are Christians find reconciliation, at-one-ment, atonement with our Jewish brothers and sisters. May we be as hospitable as the foot-washing Jesus, even treating any people who are our foes as our friends. May our prayer life and spiritual disciplines be deepened in contemplation of the cross. And finally, may we be willing to love unto death ourselves, remembering that "no one has greater love

than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." AMEN.



## NOTES

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- i. John 13: 1-9.
  - ii. The "Passion" is defined in Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as "the sufferings of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death."
  - iii. Matthew 22: 37-38.
  - iv. Luke 6:35.
  - v. Matthew 5:44.
  - vi. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 722.
  - vii. Luke 23:34.
  - viii. John 15:13.
  - ix. Bob Lepine, "The Passion of the Christ," on The Family Room at <http://www.familylife.com/familyroom>
  - x. Dennis Prager, "The Passion: Jews and Christians are Watching Different Films," <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/dennisprager/printdp20031028.shtml>
  - xi. Ibid.
  - xii. Ibid.
  - xiii. John 3:16.
  - xiv. Prager, "The Passion."
  - xv. Luke 10: 29-37.
  - xvi. John 4: 3-9.
  - xvii. Matthew 26:39.

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xviii. Matthew 26:52; Luke 22:51.

xix. Luke 23: 34, 43.

xx. Luke 4:18.

xxi. Matthew 21: 5-9; See also Mark 11: 3-10; Luke 19: 31-38; John 12: 13-15.

xxii. Luke 20:47 and 21: 2-4; Mark 12: 40-44.

xxiii. Matthew 25: 35-36.

xxiv. Jon Meacham, "Who Killed Jesus?" Newsweek (February 16, 2004), p. 53.