

For us, or with us?

March 16, 014

Scripture lesson: Luke 18:31-34

The Apostles' Creed is perhaps so familiar to us that we often perhaps fail to appreciate how little it says about the life of Jesus. Together with an affirmation of the Virgin Birth, it sums up the whole of the life and ministry of Jesus in the Passion, the events of the last two days of Holy Week – and that in nine words: “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.” It says nothing of the teaching or the healings or other miracles, only “suffered, crucified, died” - the whole of the extended story of Jesus' life in the Gospels is reduced to a mere nine words. On the basis of that alone – one must assume this was very deliberately done by the early Church – one must conclude that they contain a very important affirmation.

The Isenheim altarpiece, painted by Matthias Gruenewald, is probably less familiar to you; for those who do not know of it, it is pictured at the top of the bulletin. It is regarded as one of the absolute masterpieces of Gothic art, from the late middle ages. It too deals with the suffering, crucifixion and death of Jesus.

Liturgically we as Christians also pack a good deal of meaning into the Passion – and not merely in the church. Historically there has been the famous Passion Play at Oberammergau, presented every decade, since 1634 – and for four years now we have our own pop version touring The Netherlands. It was here in Rotterdam in 2012, in The Hague last year – and this year Jesus will suffer and die on the Fish Market in Groningen. But these spectacles are child-play compared with the film by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of Christ*, which broke box-office records and caused immense controversy everywhere it was released ten years ago. It's largely disappeared from the cultural radar over the past decade, but for those who do not remember it, it was a hyper-realistic and extremely brutal portrayal of the trial, torture and crucifixion of Jesus – Sam Peckinpah, eat your heart out! - which tended (and was intended) to leave viewers in tears and shock.

In addition to the controversial visuals in Gibson's film, there was a political problem about it, which had also better be stated from the top. With the claim that it was telling Christian truths, it went out of its way to offend all those groups Christians have traditionally loved to hate. The first to raise the alarm were Jewish and Holocaust survivor's groups: for the scenes of the trial of Jesus, Gibson chose to use the account from the first gospel as his basis, with the infamous Matthew 27:25: “And the Jewish people cried out with one voice, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’.” – which is precisely what Gibson's crowd of Jews is pictured doing. Now, it is to be noted that this reported in only one of the four Gospels - and yet this verse has had an influence in history all out of proportion to that Biblical obscurity. For the past 1000 years of Christian persecution of Jews, from the 12th century expulsion of the Jews from England and the Spanish Inquisition through Eastern European pogroms, to the Holocaust itself, Christians

have pictured “the Jews” as accepting, even welcoming and calling down upon themselves the designation of Christ-killers, thus justifying their persecution, expulsion and extermination. While it is far from the only passage in the Bible which has led to the deaths of millions – the passage in Genesis seeming to justify black slavery (Genesis 9:25) has been at least as terrible in its human cost – this is the one which has been used to justify murders within living memory. Gibson disingenuously claimed that he was only repeating what the Bible – note bene, the infallible Bible – says (although of course he could have followed the accounts in the other three gospels which omit this line), and when forced to tone it down pictured himself as a victim of anti-Christian censorship and persecution – but under pressure in some prints has removed the subtitles translating what the crowd is shouting in Aramaic, rather than cutting the scene.

The other group offended – and it is pretty clear from previous homophobic remarks that Gibson intended to offend them – are homosexuals. Taking visual clues that are universal in our Western culture, Satan was depicted as being of indeterminate gender – an effeminate man or too-masculine woman – and King Herod as a rouged and made-up old queen. Gibson cannot claim that he was just following the Bible in this: these characterisations are clearly his own hate-agenda coming through.

On the basis on this alone, it should be enough to consign the film to the same limbo that contains D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, which unfortunately one cannot get around in film history or, better, *The Eternal Jew*, which one can, and urge people not to see it.

Although Gibson’s *Passion* is brutal and shocking, even revolting, in all truth it is probably no more so than Gruenewald’s *Passion*. They are both in Technicolor – and that has always been the most shocking thing about the Isenheim altarpiece. The depiction of violence done to a person, and their suffering, is intense - look at the fingers above the cross beam of the cross - and the realism is extraordinary. Gruenewald lived in a day of intense warfare and plague, public executions and random daily violence. People knew what rotting corpses on the gallows, in the streets and beside the roads looked like, and Gruenewald has painted one. The fresh red blood contrasts with the sick, putrid green of a body covered with ulcers and lesions, that has already begun to rot before death. Papers by medical specialists and art critics debating whether a human body subjected to intense pain and suffering actually can begin to decompose before death are beside the point – which is simply that when confronted by this image, the viewer is affected in precisely the same way Gibson claimed to want to affect his viewers. Although Gibson’s is a moving image, and this a still image, the effect is overwhelming. Gruenewald’s altarpiece is one of the two most devastating works of art I have ever seen – the only other thing comparable being Picasso’s *Guernica*. The psychological, even physiological effect is the same, yet Gruenewald’s altarpiece is one of the high points of Western art, and Gibson’s film trash. What is the difference? The theology behind them.

Nowhere in the Bible are we told how we are to conceive the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we as Christians call the Messiah. We are told about it in

the passion narratives in each of the Gospels, but we are never told precisely what it means, what its purpose was. Or rather, and better, we are given at least half-a-dozen different hints and explanations in the New Testament for what it means: in Scripture we are not given ONE single interpretation, but many. On the other hand, for about the last 1000 years, since the high middle ages, the Church, Roman and Protestant alike, has pretty much agreed on one single meaning: substitutionary atonement. What that term means is that God insists that somebody has to pay for – the theological word is ‘atone’ for – our sins – and by his grace he decided that somebody was Jesus Christ. He suffered these terrible torments, which we deserved as punishment for our sin – suffered them for us, in our place, so that we wouldn’t have to. He is our substitute in making the payment: thus “substitutionary atonement”. This is what Gibson, and Oberammegau and the cuddlier Dutch “passions” all say the message: you are to see, in sometimes terrible, gruesome, agonising detail, what Jesus suffered for you, what he underwent for you, what did for you, and you are to come away moved – moved to thankfulness if you are a Christian already, and if you are not a Christian, you are to be moved to repentance by seeing what he bore for you. You are also to be moved by a sense of how much you owe to Jesus for this, and that should make you work harder to be a good disciple. But anyhow, in this theology it is no accident that the passion story was the first part of the New Testament to be composed as a single narrative, years before it was read into all the four gospels in almost identical form; it is no accident that the Apostles’ Creed sums up the whole life of Jesus in the words “suffered, crucified, died and was buried” – because that suffering to pay for your sins is the heart of the Gospel. That is the theology of 95% of the church – maybe more.

But it is not the theology of the Isenheim altarpiece. We know why this altarpiece was painted, and where it stood, and what it was supposed to mean. It was created for an altar, not in a church, but in a plague hospital run by the monks of St. Anthony’s monastery at Isenheim. A hospital in those days was not a place where you sent to get well, it was a place you went to die, like a hospice today, but with much less comfort, though it was still far superior to dying in a ditch somewhere. In your dying days you were cared for by the monks, and one of the ways they provided for you was spiritually. The beds were lined up along the walls of the long, church-like hospitals; from each bed you had a clear view of the altar at the end, where masses were said, and above it, at Isenheim, this painting. This is not like a museum, or even a normal church, and certainly not like a theatre, where you are expected to see the film and then go home in the SUV or BMW God blessed you with, praising God because Jesus has suffered for you, so now you don’t have to suffer. The audience for whom this altarpiece was intended were themselves suffering, terminally. Their only going home would be to their God.

The medium is the message, as Marshal McLuhan said in the 1960s: and the message here is not that God has suffered FOR you, but that he is suffering WITH you. What you see here is that your suffering is His suffering, your pain is His pain, your death is His death. The message of this gospel is that in Jesus, whom we call the Messiah, God has come into this wretched, sinful world, to seek

us out, to share our fate with us, and in that sharing, to take us, its sinners, its sufferers, home. In that gesture our sin, which separated us from God, is simply forgiven. There is no drama about how 'somebody's gonna' have to pay for this': if anyone suffers, it is God Himself, who simply lets the offence of our sin stop with him, accepts the insult and pain we cause by our disobedience – and then takes on the rest of our worldly suffering too. The metaphor, if we want one, is the father of the prodigal son, who accepts the way his son insulted him, counts his own suffering as what the son should have paid, and comes out to welcome him when he is still a long way off, uncertainly making his way toward home.

Now, this is not some sort of liberal theology which says of the passion 'Jesus was just a good teacher, and look how the world always treats those who try to help it'. The theology of the Isenheim altarpiece too says that the suffering, crucifixion, death and burial were vitally important, necessary, that it was no accident these were the first part of the Gospel to be composed, that they are the whole summary of Jesus' life in the Creed. It was necessary that God-with-us should suffer this way, not to pay a debt for sin, but so that no person, abandoned by friends and family, whose body was literally rotting away in a plague hospital – so that no person being tortured in an underground cell belonging to some dictator of any stripe, where no one but God can hear his cries – so that no one condemned by a court where the judges care more for the will of political or social opinion than for justice – so that no one meeting their death in a camp in the Third Reich or Cambodia – so that no one being ethnically cleansed in Kosova, in the 1990s, so that no one being slaughtered in a church where they sought sanctuary in Rwanda, so that no one burying relatives killed in a terrorist attack in New York or Madrid, or an anti-terrorist attack in Gaza or Pakistan, or caught up in the proxy-war in Syria – so that none of these persons can think for a moment that God's love and understanding stops short of what they are going through, that it does not reach so far as them. God has known what they experience; there is nothing in loneliness, betrayal, torture, injustice, death that we can encounter that God has not already taken to himself.

The medium is the message. Both the Isenheim altarpiece and Gibson's Passion may be images of suffering, but who the image is intended for, where it was seen, makes all the difference in its theology. It is not that God suffered for you, so that you can go home happy; it is that God suffers with you, when he comes to take you home.

But there's another difference. The Isenheim altarpiece is a moving picture. Gibson's movie is not; no matter how many frames go through the projector per second, it is static. It stops with the suffering; that is its intended focus. But in its original setting the altarpiece moved. When mass was celebrated, what you see here swung open – the line of the doors runs right down the left edge of the cross – to reveal another painting, painted in warm reds and yellows – a painting of the resurrection. Behind the suffering – absolutely literally – is resurrection, new life. I suppose Mel Gibson would say the same: suffering of Jesus, having paid out debts, results in our justification and new life. But that's not quite the same

message. Gruenewald's altarpiece says that behind OUR suffering, shared by God in Christ, there is new life. It's not that new life is bought by our suffering; that is still a further development of substitutionary atonement, where we are brought back into the transaction. The theology of the Isenheim altarpiece isn't about any sort of transaction at all; it is about the love and mercy of God and the hope of new life that comes from and in and through the creator of all life. As in the ancient Christian hymn Paul quotes in Philippians, it is about humility and obedience to death, crowned by God's grace with honour and immortality. There is resurrection, and it lies behind the suffering of this world. Whether or not it is true that one reaches it only by the suffering, it is true that the suffering does open up to reveal it.

Thus I can agree with the evangelical who says "Jesus died for you" - because if he had not died, I would have had no way of knowing that God's love follows me all the way to the gates of death, and beyond. We cannot imagine the Good News without the Passion, any more than we can imagine the gospels without the passion narratives. But wallowing in the suffering, this fixation on the suffering, equally distorts the story. One cannot have Easter without Good Friday - but one must not get stuck on Good Friday either.

The Manchester Guardian, noting that the dialogue in the film is in the "original" Aramaic, provided a satirical phrase-book for discussions of the film in Aramaic too. The final entry was the Aramaic for "It's sort of like Life of Brian, only not half so funny." At the risk of being offensive myself, I somehow feel that Life of Brian probably comes closer to the spirit of the gospel than Gibson's excruciating epic does. But Gruenewald's altarpiece, in its original setting, with its resurrection behind the assurance of God's sharing our suffering, comes closest of all.