

*Sermon Lent I 2004*

I think Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* may well turn out to be the best thing ever to appear on the screen about Jesus. All those old Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Robe* were just sentimental Kitsch compared with Gibson's serious treatment of the Lord's Passion and death. Those old films were sanitised, bowdlerised versions of what is, let's face it, an horrific story of torture and death. All those beautiful Jesus's going handsomely – even prettily – to a stylised death. According to the early reviews, what Mel Gibson gives us is the real thing. It's the first bit of authentic Christianity we've seen in the mass media for decades. Now, you know me well enough my dears: I speak in this space nearly every Sunday and I'm not much given to optimism when I see how the world is going; but I even think Mel's film could be a turning point

The crucifixion was a brutal act of torture, not a picturesque subject for an Easter card. Gibson renders the horrible event with something approaching what must have been the reality: terror, pain, blood and death. They didn't drive the nails into the palms of the hands, but through the wrists. And the crucified victim died of suffocation when he couldn't hold his head up any longer. In short, it was not a romantic scene.

What we need to clear out straight away is this daft notion that Mel's film is anti-Semitic. Yes, the Jewish authorities killed Jesus. The Romans did too. Think about it: it had to be somebody – and Jews and Romans were the only nationalities around in that part of the world at the time. If the appalling business had been played out at another point in history – who knows? – the culprits might well have been fishermen from Clacton and gorgeous young typists from Croydon.

The point is that human beings – all of us – have got something wrong with us. It's a fact that we are deeply flawed. You can dress it up in religious language if you like and call it Original Sin. But you don't need to use such exalted language. My old friend and sparring-partner David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, summed it up in three words: "It's the buggeration factor." St Paul put it rather more elegantly: "The thing I would, that I do not; and the thing I would not. That I do."

That's it. That's the human predicament in a nutshell. There's nothing we can't understand there, is there? It's all in words of one syllable. And when God saw that we had made a mess of things, he had a choice. He could either leave us to our miserable devices, or he could come and rescue us. He – I'm tempted to say, thank God – came to rescue us. So who killed Jesus? Jews, yes. Romans, sure thing. But they were the men who just happened to be around at the time. It could just as well have been you and me. In fact, and I guess you know it, it is you and me. Remember the moving old spiritual *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?* Yes, we were all there. And we're still there at the Cross, knocking in the nails with our persistent acts of selfishness, mean-spiritedness and sheer perversity. And astonishingly Jesus gives us the same full and holy cure in those awful and yet infinitely tender words, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This forgiveness is for everyone. And the only people who cannot receive it are those who think they have no need of it: those who imagine themselves to be righteous and

despise others; these are not righteous at all, but only self-righteous. And self-righteousness has a social and political dimension too. It is a fact of history that when any politician, revolutionary or devotee of social engineering boldly announces that he, his party, his project are about to usher in heaven on earth and create utopia, the tumbrels and the reign of terror are never far behind. Think of the French Revolution.

Think of the Soviet Revolution when the official propaganda spoke of universal peace and happiness while the reality was that tens of millions of ordinary folk were being murdered in the Gulag and through the policy of collective farming. It is a constant source of amazement and outrage to me that the many western intellectuals and fellow-travellers have never stopped to apologise for supporting that regime. One recalls Sidney and Beatrice Webb's lifelong devotion to the Soviet Union; of Bernard Shaw's words when he returned from a visit in 1931 to the effect that there was no poverty or unhappiness there and that, I quote, "It is obvious at first glance that the Soviet Union is acting in the interests of civilisation". One thinks of Eric Hobsbawm's relentless tributes to that vile social experiment.

Mel Gibson's film is very explicit with lots of blood and pain. But there is one piece of distancing which he does superbly, and that is to have most of the dialogue in Latin and Aramaic. Goodness! What would the Liturgical Commission say to that – the plebs being talked to in the ancient languages, not even 16<sup>th</sup> century English! There are, after all, some things that are too holy, too terrible – and the word "holy" is closely allied in those ancient languages with the word "terrible" – to mention. The death of God is one of those things. In the midst of all our trivia, "I'm a celebrity" and all that drivel, Mel Gibson has reminded us of what alone can do us good: "...who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; suffered and was buried".