

The Pride of the Passion

Now that the critical dust has settled over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, I thought it might be time to reflect on the artistic success of this controversial venture.

Much ink has been shed over the perceived anti-semitism of the film; put simply, 'the Romans didn't kill Jesus, the Jews did.' My personal view is that this chimes pretty much with my reading of the gospels: the Pharisees arraigned Jesus first, and then took him to Pilate, and the latter is presented as a weakish man who gave into the crowd's bloodlust for the sake of avoiding civil unrest. The verse from St Matthew's gospel, 'His blood be on us and upon all our children', which is cited as evidence of Gibson's insensitivity and which the Vatican has explicitly avoided since the early 1960s, is indeed spoken but not subtitled (the entire film is in Aramaic and Latin, in case you didn't realize). True, Pilate's wife is added, a kind of convertee in the making, who has had ominous dreams and provides Mary with clean towels to mop up her son's blood.

But when I viewed the film, I was above all aware that I was watching a movie, and I use the word advisedly. The above concerns, about which I had read already, were at the back of my mind. And therein lies the danger of the film, critics will say. The whole apparatus of the production - the extreme violence, the rhetorical flourishes of slow motion and close-up, the emotional string pulling of telling details such as Pilate's wife's towels and, later, the Turin shroud scene - everything is directed towards two basic plot themes: the unworthiness of humanity next to the dignity and courage of this man/god, and the unbearable suffering of a mother who sees her offspring undergo such torture and is not only powerless to stop it but knows it has to be.

These are also, incidentally, two aspects of the Christ story with which the mass film-going public is most likely to identify. Which is why there is none of Pasolini's radical demagogue (*The Gospel According to St Matthew*, 1961) in this film, indeed little of Christ teaching at all. Instead Gibson bludgeons his audience into submission by using a language they understand (violence in the movies) but to the point where it hurts, (and one might unkindly add that he dresses it up by using two that they don't.) It is a bravura piece of filmmaking, totally effective in its aims (witness its enormous commercial success); it left me shaken, and somehow elated.