

'The Christ of the Passion'

(1) **Picture from the film downloaded from the web site.**

I don't know whether I want to see Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ', or not – and that's not because I think that there is something wrong with the film, but because I am not sure how I will cope with the visual awfulness of crucifixion. One elderly Methodist lady who went to see it in Maidstone, Kent, emerged from the cinema shaking and in tears, and said: *I have should never have come. It was terrible, the film was disgusting. I have never seen anything like it in my life. They never did that, did they? They wouldn't do that to a human?* (Times 27/03/04)

I think I will go to see this film – I know that there are some people who have real doubts about whether it is right to make a film about the death of Jesus, but I'm inclined to think that if the film draws the attention of a very secular world to the events of Good Friday and Easter, and gets people talking and thinking, then it will have achieved something worthwhile.

I'm struck by the comments of Dr. Billy Graham: *After watching 'The Passion of the Christ' I feel as if I have actually been there. I was moved to tears. I doubt if there has ever been a more graphic and moving presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection.*

This morning, I want us to think about this *Passion of the Christ* – not the film, but the reality upon which it is based - and about the person who is at the centre of that passion – ***the Christ of the Passion.***

Think with me, therefore, for a little while, about the following:

(2)

1. The Passion of the Christ.
2. The Purpose behind the Passion.
3. The Promise coming from the Passion.

1. The Passion of the Christ. (3)

We tend to operate with a fairly comfortable view of the Cross. Of course, we know it was bad, but it doesn't cause us too much shock or surprise – we've heard about the crucifixion so many times – our best hymns always bring us back to the cross and we sing about it so often; we use the cross as a sort of Christian corporate logo, and often as a piece of jewellery.

Nothing wrong with any of these – but maybe most of us have forgotten, or never really understood, just how terrible a business crucifixion really was – just what Jesus went through.

The gospels, including Mark's, do not go into great detail about it – he just mentions about Jesus needing help to carry the cross to the place called Golgotha, and he refers briefly to Jesus declining a drink of wine that had some kind of sedative/painkiller in it, and then Mark simply says in vs.24-25 *It was the third hour when they crucified him.*

It might be that the Gospel writers didn't want us to know much about the physical detail – I think that is more likely that they simply assumed that their readers would know.

But for people like us, so long afterwards, we maybe need to be reminded – and maybe the film does us a service by doing just that - in graphic detail that is almost too vividly horrendous for us to cope with. I was talking the other day to another minister who has seen it, and he told me that he had to close his eyes as the soldiers prepared to drive the nails into Christ's wrists!

Crucifixion was cruelly inhuman, beyond our imagination.

Writing in the Belfast Telegraph, Alf McCreary says this: *The torture and murder of the physical Christ of history was indeed ghastly. In one sense the Mel Gibson interpretation of the Gospels has liberated Christ from the traditional soft-hued portrayals of stained glass windows, and underlined that his trial and crucifixion was bloody and painful in the extreme. To that extent, the film has performed a necessary service*

It seems to me that when we hear people speak about how stomach churning this portrayal of the crucifixion is, we need to

remind ourselves that this is precisely because the crucifixion of a human being was stomach churning. So terrible was crucifixion that no Roman citizen was permitted to undergo it, however heinous his crime – this terrible, tortuous death was kept for non-Roman citizens, like Jesus.

Cicero, the Roman historian called crucifixion *a most cruel and terrible penalty ...incapable of description by any word, for there is none fit to describe it* and Klausner, the Jewish writer says, *Crucifixion is the most terrible and cruel death which man has ever devised for taking vengeance on his fellow men.*

(Milne – John’s Gospel & Barclay - Matthew)

We probably know this, but it doesn’t always sink in as it needs to: *We may not know, we cannot tell, what pains he had to bear.*

O Sacred Head, sore wounded, with grief and shame weighed down ... how pale art thou with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!

Maybe we’ve even heard Jesus own words too many times – do you remember, the Garden of Gethsemane, as he struggled with the fearful dread of what was to come: *‘He began to be deeply distressed and troubled: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done ...”, and being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.* (Luke22:42)

Jesus knew, too well what lay ahead. This was not a matter of something that had to be done but that would be bearable. It was not even something that wouldn’t be so bad for Jesus, because of who he was and because he somehow knew the end of the story! In Gethsemane, Jesus was simply trying to face the fact that ahead of him lay suffering so terrible as to be unimaginable and unbearable – suffering every bit as terrible as that portrayed by the film.

And do you remember those awful words that Jesus uttered from the agony of the cross itself, *Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* – those words come from Psalm 22 which also contain words about God’s hope – so perhaps Jesus was reminding himself of that hope– but in uttering those opening anguished words of abandonment, we surely hear Jesus, completely at the end of his tether, in the terrible depths of physical, mental and spiritual suffering – going through absolute loneliness and hopelessness.

And we need to take heed – the Cross was no picnic!

It was a place of the most awful, unbearable suffering – this is the truth of the Passion of the Christ – and no film could make it worse than it was for Jesus – the Christ of the Passion.

1. The Passion of the Christ

2. **The Purpose behind the Passion. (4)**

Hundreds of people would have died the same sickening, revolting death that Jesus died when he was crucified – we know that there were two other men being crucified that very same day, going through exactly what Jesus was going through. Indeed, we’re told, that for some victims the agony went on for days – remember how Mark tells us that Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead – so what actually happened to Jesus was not in any way unique – there may even have been other innocent men crucified.

Therefore, if Jesus’ death is to be more than just another terrible example of the inhumanity of man and the dark darkness of a dark world, there has to be a purpose behind the Passion of the Christ – and it is important for us to ask ourselves again: What was that Purpose?

As Jesus faced up to the Cross in the Garden he was sure that the Cross was the purpose and plan of God – *Take this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will.*

Indeed Jesus had been sure for a lot longer that everything in his life was leading him towards this death: *The Son of Man must suffer many things ... be rejected ... and he must be killed ...* Jesus was sure that this was the appointed purpose of his life. But what was that purpose about? Why did it have to be? Surely, wherever we look in the Gospel that purpose is spoken of – nowhere more so than in that Bible verse that nearly everybody could quote: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* John 3:16

i) No price too great – *for God so loved the world* - not even the very death of his own and only Son by crucifixion – no price was too great for God to pay in order to demonstrate his love for ordinary people like us.

ii) No prospect more critical – than the possibility of people perishing without hope – therefore God gave Jesus, so that *whoever believes in him might not perish* – he gave him even to crucifixion – what an awful word, ‘perish’!

iii) No punishment too severe – *he was pierced for our transgressions ... crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.* That’s how the OT prophet, Isaiah, explained the purpose of Jesus’ death long before it happened.

And when it did happen, that is still the explanation the Gospel gives to us over and over again:

- that Jesus’ terrible death was the awesome judgement of God, not upon Jesus, but upon all other people – including you and me – that he was the substitute taking our place and suffering our punishment.
- that this is God’s verdict of judgement, in view of our damaged and damaging lives; our lives that are often a disappointment to ourselves, and certainly to God; our lives that easily give other people the cold shoulder, and that squeeze God out altogether many a time – this is what we would deserve – this is what would cause us to perish had not

God so loved the world – this is still what would cause us to perish if we remain outside of trust in Christ.

As Son of God, this Passion of the Christ was God, himself, taking the punishment and paying the price.

As Son of Man, this Passion of the Christ was Jesus taking our place and securing our forgiveness and our hope.

This is the Purpose behind the Passion – God’s purpose of love and forgiveness and hope – not secured in an easy or cheap way – *not with perishable things such as silver or goldbut with the precious blood of Christ ...* (1 Peter 1)

1. The Passion of the Christ

2. The Purpose behind the Passion.

3. The Promise coming from the Passion. (5)

It was only when Easter Day dawned that the Passion of the Christ, and the Purpose behind the Passion, began to make much sense to the first followers of Jesus – and even then it took a while for it all to sink in.

Mark tells us that even having gone to the tomb and been told, *He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him ...He is going ahead of you into Galilee* – they went away trembling and bewildered and they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

However slowly but surely those men and women who had stood at the empty tomb and had experienced meeting with the risen Jesus, became utterly sure that this was the very same Jesus whom they had seen mocked and flogged, crucified, flesh ripped open by nails and spear – the Jesus whose earthly remains they had seen laid to rest – that he was alive again and that he was Lord for ever and ever.

And for us, it is on this Easter morning that we can make some sense of that horrendous death of Jesus, and we can see that the purposes behind the Passion were accomplished.

At the very end of his Passion, John tells us that Jesus cried out ***It is finished*** – note well, not, ***I am finished*** – but **It** - everything that he had faced the cross to achieve for us had been finished and accomplished.

- he had given his life as a ransom for many people, like us.- the ransom is paid!
- The promise that he had made to the thief on the cross beside him – *today you will be with me in paradise* – Jesus’ resurrection means that he can deliver on that promise - here was the evidence that the promise meant something – and here is the assurance that the promise is also for us.

- *In my Father’s house are many rooms ... I am going there to prepare a place for you* – now we know that there is substance behind these lovely words – because *Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in him will live even though he dies*. These are the promises that come from the Passion of the Christ. As the Easter reality sank in, scared and bewildered disciples began to know that these promises were for real, and they began to take their courage in their hands, and with their hearts in their mouths, they stood up and they spoke out for Jesus and faith in him.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

That was how they felt because of Jesus’ resurrection – and this is our cause for celebration on this Easter Day.

- Jesus **has** paid the price and taken the punishment for my sinful life that is so disappointing to God. I can trust completely in God’s love and forgiveness.
- Jesus **has** overcome all the evil people and evil powers that are, everywhere, at work in this world and that threaten everything that is good and hopeful. I can live with courage and determination.
- Jesus **has** broken the back of death, and even though it still exists and still hurts badly, its worst sting is gone – it

cannot destroy in the end, and all who trust in Jesus have the sure and certain hope of eternal life. I can live with strength and hope.

These are the promises of the Passion – sure promises because of the Easter Day Resurrection of Jesus.

This is much, much more than the stuff of blockbuster movies – no matter how moving.

This is no less than the very truth of the living God – the truth of nail marks in the hand and spear tracks in the side of Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried, and whom God has raised from death – the truth which caused one man to fall to his knees, professing, *My Lord and my God.*

The movie will undoubtedly move more than a few people to shock and tears. It may very well help some people to understand better, and to ask more questions about the Gospel.

But until we do what Thomas did – bowing in humble, repentant faith and submitting our lives to the Christ of the Passion, nothing will have been achieved.

Today we hear again the Gospel of his Passion and the Good News of his Resurrection. This is the very truth of God and the very word of eternal life.

We need to be asking ourselves if we have submitted in glad conviction and repentant trust, placing our lives, by faith in the hands of Christ.

And we need to make sure that we are doing that again and again as we go from day to day in our lives.

When the trust and hope of our lives is in the Christ of the Passion, then we are safe and secure, no matter what.

(1) Image from the film downloaded from the web site:
www.passionofthechrist.co.uk

(Perhaps the image from the attached flier, or select 'Film Details – go to Gallery – maybe either the image that is on the left of the middle row or the middle of the bottom row.)

(2)

1. The Passion of the Christ.
2. The Purpose behind the Passion.
3. The Promise coming from the Passion.

(3) **1. The Passion of the Christ.**

(4) **1. The Passion of the Christ**
2. The Purpose behind the Passion.

(5) **1. The Passion of the Christ**
2. The Purpose behind the Passion.
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Easter Sunday Morning, 11th April, 2004

Choir: O what a morning

Welcome

Call to Worship

Praise: Jesus, Christ is risen today (Hymn 264)

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Mark 15:21-41

Children's Talk

Children's Praise: God's not dead

(Children Leave)

Offering

Dedication of Offering

Announcements

Choir: I love you Lord

Scripture Reading: Mark 15:42- 16:8

Prayers

Praise: Come and see (Praise 415)

Sermon

Praise: Jesus, Prince and Saviour (Praise 466)

Benediction

Boys and Girls,

I'm going to unroll this poster very slowly – just a little bit at a time – you watch very carefully, and the minute you think you know what this poster is about, you stick up your hand – but don't shout out!

(Hopefully someone will shout out Kellogg's cornflakes – stop unrolling at this point)

Are Cornflakes your favourite breakfast cereal?

What other cereals do you like?

Hope nobody has been eating Easter Eggs for breakfast today!

Actually this poster is not about cornflakes at all – let's have a good look at the whole poster – could I have 2 volunteers to hold it up really well for the rest of us to see/

It says: **Celebrate – Jesus is Alive - Wake up to Easter.**

When the friends of Jesus woke up on the first Easter, they were so sad – they had been there when Jesus was crucified – they had seen all the terrible things that had happened to Jesus, right up to when he died. They had seen his battered body placed in a sort of dug out cave, called a tomb. They were sure that this was the complete end of Jesus.

On the Sunday morning they got up very early – they wanted to go back to the tomb where Jesus had been put and spend a wee while there. But when they got there they discovered that they weren't the only people who had woken up early that day – **Jesus had woken up from death** – a messenger told them that Jesus had risen – he wasn't there any more – he was alive again. They couldn't really understand it – indeed they were quite scared by everything.

Later on they met Jesus, and talked with him. They began to understand that it was true – Jesus was alive – and not just for a

little while. It wasn't as if Jesus would die again one day – they began to know that Jesus was alive for ever.

That's why we can trust in Jesus – because he is alive today, all these years later – and he will always be alive – and because he is alive, we can have him as our friend for life.

Jesus is alive today – even though we cannot see him - that's why we are at church to worship him.

Because he is alive, and we trust in him, we know that we will always be safe – even if our lives are ever hard or sad.

And so, as the poster says, we should celebrate – indeed we should be really glad every morning we wake up and every day we live – because Jesus, our Lord and our Friend from God, is alive for ever and ever – and we can trust in him.