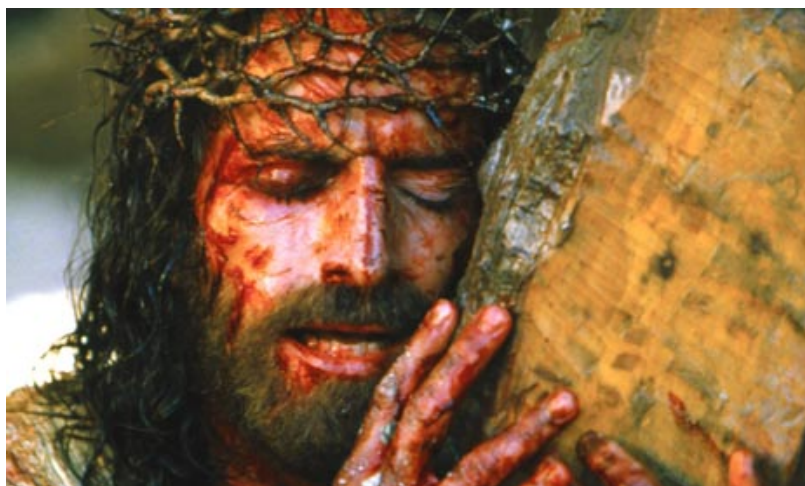


The Garden of Gethsemane



Several years ago, Mel Gibson produced and directed a movie which enjoyed a spectacular popularity. Entitled, *The Passion of the Christ*, the movie depicts Jesus' paschal journey from the Garden of Gethsemane to his death on Golgotha, but with a very heavy emphasis on his physical suffering. The movie shows in graphic detail what someone who was being crucified might have had to endure in terms of being physically beaten, tortured, and humiliated.

While most church groups applauded the film and suggested that, finally, someone made a movie the truly depicted Jesus' suffering, many scripture scholars and spiritual writers were critical of the movie. Why? What's wrong with showing, at length and in graphic detail, the blood and gore of the crucifixion – which, indeed, must have been pretty horrific?

What's wrong (or better, perhaps, amiss) is that this is precisely what the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death don't do. All four Gospels take pains to not focus on the physical sufferings of Jesus. Their descriptions of his physical sufferings are stunningly brief: "They crucified him with the two criminals." "Pilate had Jesus scourged and handed him over to be crucified." Why the brevity here? Why no detailed description?

The reason that the Evangelists don't focus us on what Jesus was enduring physically is that they want us to focus something else, namely, on what Jesus was enduring emotionally and morally. The passion of Jesus is, in its real depth, a moral drama, not a physical one, the suffering of a lover, not that of an athlete.

Thus we see that, when Jesus is anticipating his passion, the anxiety he expresses is not about the whips that will beat him or the nails that will pierce his hands. He is pained and anxious rather about the aloneness he is facing, how he will be betrayed and abandoned by those who profess to love him, and how he will, in the wonderful phraseology of Gil Bailie, be "unanimity-minus-one".

That the passion of Jesus is a love-drama is also evident in its setting. It begins with him sweating blood in a garden – and ends with him being buried in a garden. Jesus is sweating blood in a garden, not in an arena. What's significant about a garden?

In archetypal symbolism, gardens are not for growing vegetables or even for growing flowers. Gardens are for lovers, the place to experience delight, the place to drink wine, the place where Adam and Eve

were naked and didn't know it, the place where one makes love.

And so the Evangelists place the beginning and the end of Jesus' passion in a garden to emphasize that it is Jesus, as lover (not Jesus as King, or Magus, or Prophet) who is undergoing this drama. And what precisely was the drama? When Jesus is sweating blood in the Garden and begging his Father to spare him having to "drink the cup", the real choice he is facing is not: Will I let myself die or will I invoke divine power and save my life? Rather the choice was: "How will die? Will I die angry, bitter, and unforgiving, or will I die with a warm, forgiving heart?"

Of course, we know how Jesus resolved this drama, how he chose forgiveness and died forgiving his executioners, and how, inside all that darkness, he remained solidly inside the message that he had preached his whole ministry, namely, that ultimately love, community, and forgiveness triumph.

Moreover, what Jesus did in that great moral drama is something we're supposed to imitate rather than simply admire because that drama is also ultimately the drama of love within our own lives, presenting itself to us in countless ways. Namely:

At the end of our lives, how will we die? Will our hearts be angry, clinging, unforgiving, and bitter at the unfairness of life? Or, will our hearts be forgiving, grateful, empathic, warm, as was the heart of Jesus when he said to his Father not my will but yours be done?

Moreover this is not just one, major choice we face at the hour of death; it is also a choice we face daily, many times daily. Countless times in our daily interactions with others, our families, our colleagues, our friends, and with society at large, we suffer moments of coldness, misunderstanding, unfairness, and positive violation. From the indifference of a family member to our enthusiasm, to a sarcastic comment that is intended to hurt us, to a gross unfairness in our workplace, to being the victim of a prejudice or abuse; our kitchen tables, our workplaces, our meeting rooms, and the streets we share with others, are all places where we daily experience, in small and big ways, what Jesus felt in the garden of Gethsemane, unanimity-minus-one. In that darkness will we let go of our light? In the face of hatred will we let go of love?

That's the real drama of the Passion of the Christ – and the ropes, whips, and nails are not the central drama.

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