

The Passion of the Christ Recut (2004)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- ; L- ; S/N-

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

Can deleting six minutes of aThe Passion of the Christ film make much of a difference?Recut

Yes it can, when that film is The Passion of the Christ! Mel Gibson's decision to cut out some shots of excessive violence in his film is a good one. The loss of about six minutes of blood and gore—mainly from the graphic scourging sequence—is actually a gain for the viewer. The scene in which the sadistic Roman guards gleefully rip into Christ's body, first with rods, and then with a Roman version of the cat-of-nine-tails, passes by much more quickly, though it is still a difficult sequence to watch. As the guards look over the table on which the whipping instruments are laid out, and later, when Mary and Mary Magdalene also survey them before dropping to their knees to wash up the spilt blood of Jesus, I was reminded of the

seemingly endless array of torturing devices used by brutal men down through the centuries, including those used by Saddam Hussein and his henchmen, and also, alas, by a few Americans as well. Gibson is showing us that Jesus takes upon himself all the pain and cruelty meted out to "the least of these" in every age.

This time around I was more taken by the number of flashbacks. At first I thought Gibson must have added a few, there seemed to be so many, but a scanning of my DVD copy of the film, showed that they were all there in the first place, although the segment of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount preaching the love of enemies seems to have been inserted a bit earlier into the film than before.

So that you will have a list to refer to when reflecting on or discussing the film, here they are:

1) Mary calls Jesus to eat while he is working on a table. The humor of this was more evident this time around: Mary commenting on how high the table is, asks if the owner will eat standing up; Jesus shows that the diners will sit in chairs, yet to be made; Mary crouching over in imitation of her son, replies that this will "never catch on." 2) The Last Supper when Jesus warns Peter that he will deny his Master.

3) Cut from a close up of the foot of one of Jesus' torturers to the scene of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples.

4) Cut from the bowl of water brought to Pilate to Jesus and the disciples washing their hands at the Last Supper.

5) Cut from Mary Magdalene's face to the scene of the Woman caught in adultery—the two faces are the same, Gibson

indicating that the two women are one and the same.

6) Mary sees Jesus falling with the cross—cut to his falling as a little child. The parallel action of Mary rushing to her son's aid and assuring him "I am here" is powerfully memorable.

7) As Jesus carries the cross and the crowds mock him there are brief glimpses from his point of view of his entry on a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

8) Further along the road to Calvary we go back to when he declared, "I am the Good Shepherd." 9) Again there is a flashback to the Last Supper when Jesus blesses the bread.

10) At Golgotha Jesus recalls the Upper Room where he told the disciples that they couldn't yet go where he is going, but that they are to love one another "as I have loved you." One of the soldiers wields the hammer and nail at this point.

11) Jesus, again back in the Upper Room, declares that he is "the way, the truth, and the life." 12) As he is crucified we see again the bread of the Last Supper being passed to him, wrapped in a cloth in a basket.

13) The cross is raised, jarring his body painfully, and then back to the Last Supper when Jesus pours the wine and declares that it is his blood of the covenant.

That is far more "context" than I had remembered the first time, even though some of the scenes are very brief. Watching the equally brief resurrection scene again reinforced my original impression that this is all that is needed, Gibson's focus being upon the costly sacrifice that Jesus made for us, and not his victory. This is not enough, of course, for a full appreciation and understanding of Christ—thank God we have Godpsell, The Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Miniseries, The Miracle Maker, the Gospel of John, and others.

Something else I barely noticed at the first viewing: the two mandala shots, one of good, the other of evil. Derived from Eastern art, where it represents the cosmos, the mandala is also used by some Christians, such as Hildegard of Bingen (see the beautiful book *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, Matthew Fox) and the contemporary Sri Lankan artist Nalini Jayasuriya (see p. 133 of *The Bible Through Asian Eyes* and p. 44 of *Christ For All Peoples*). I don't know how much Mr. Gibson or his art director know about the meaning of the mandala, but the use of it is very intriguing. Both shots are from on high. In the first we are looking down upon the crucifixion, the area and the crowd around the cross, contained within a brightly lit circle within a mass of darkness. This shot is brief, soon we are hurtling down with a raindrop, the first of a driving torrent heralding the onslaught of storm and earthquake.

To those who understand the symbolism of the mandala this shot seems to be saying that the destiny of the whole world, indeed, of the cosmos, now centers on what is happening on the cross. The second shot could be seen as the shadow or dark side of the first, for within it we see Satan, and he is screaming. His scream is not that of triumph over the death of Christ, but of agonizing defeat—that somehow at the cross, which he thought would be his moment of supreme victory, he has instead himself been vanquished. Sacrificial love is indeed stronger than self-centered hatred.

This time too I was even more impressed by the suffering of other participants in the Passion, and not just that of Jesus. When he realizes that he has done exactly as his Master had predicted, denied his Lord three times, Peter rushes to Mary and pours out his confession. Even greater is the spiritual agony of Judas. We see him surrounded and tormented by a group of boys whose countenances take on demonic attributes. The “demons” drive him up the hill to where he sees the head of the dead and decaying animal. The buzzing sound of the flies

call to mind one of the titles of Satan, "Lord of the Flies." Judas takes the rope tether from the dead animal and uses it to hang himself. He commits the one sin that cannot be forgiven—of giving up on the grace of god, as if Christ could not have forgiven and redeemed him.

The greatest mental and spiritual suffering of all—next to that of Jesus, of course—is that of Mary. It is always painful for a mother to bury a child, but to have to stand by helplessly and watch his enemies mock and torment him and to see his slow death on a shameful cross must have hurt beyond all description. The film does an excellent job in showing us Mary's agony—in the scene in which she drops to her knees to mop up her Son's blood at the scourging pillar; and in the scene in which he falls and the parallel sequence of his falling as a boy, and Mary both times saying, "I am here." Her face as she watches her son being nailed to the cross and then slowly dying upon it, his blood in one scene splashing upon her when she embraces the cross, is an unforgettable study in maternal agony. The film can help us especially during this time when we Protestants are regaining our respect for Mary, present at both the birth and the death of her Son. (See the cover story on Mary in the March 21st issue of TIME Magazine.)

Gibson's film is a worthy addition to a collection of Jesus films, forming with the others a film mosaic in which a little of the glory and the mystery of Christ are brought home to us. It is a far better made film than some of his harsh critics claimed a year ago. This time I do recommend that you see it—and then go and listen to Isaac Watt's great hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," while gazing upon a reproduction of Mathias Gruenwald's "The Crucifixion" from his Eisenheim Altar.

For a discussion guide for the film go to visualparables.net and click on the "Current Movies" bar—or see pp.39-40 of the Spring 2004 VP. This issue also includes the 8-page "A Survey of Jesus Films" plus the article "The Passion of the Christ

and Emotional Spiritual Life.” Copies are till availablefor \$6 plus \$1 postage.