



The Passion of the Christ

If Kai hadn't asked me to review this film, I wouldn't have lasted to the end. Frankly, it contained the most brutal and sadistic passages of cinema I have ever seen and I found them deeply upsetting, so much so that I was incapable of feeling moved, stirred or anything else but sick horror at the bloody pulp stuck on a stick by the end of the film. The resurrection? So what?

This is not to say that I object to people knowing and seeing the reality of Jesus' dying in tortured pain and his real and complete human death, but I wouldn't (for example) have taken a congregation to see it without being very clear what they were going to be subjected to. The unrelenting witness means there is no place or opportunity to reject brutality, inhumanity, the misuse of power, the enjoyment of another's pain. I couldn't ever see this film as an evangelistic tool.

Two things about the cinematography particularly struck me. The film seems to be about frozen human impotence, the inability to act, just as we, the cinema-goers, are also impotent, stuck in our seats forced to witness the torture. Apart from Peter's strike at the beginning, the disciples, woken from sleep, stand around helplessly. Mary and the women follow Jesus but can do nothing, even small acts of compassion are denied with violence. Pilate is similarly unable to act decisively, to make something happen that will stop the process descending into an orgy of violence. Herod peers into Jesus's face uncomprehendingly, while insane laughter echoes about him. Jesus himself does nothing, but submits and submits and submits as the blows fall and the blood flows. Even Simon of Cyrene, flailing about shouting 'leave him alone' is tossed aside and sent away.

We can only leave, or shut our eyes, or we shall have them horribly pecked out like those of the unrepentant thief. There is yet another important technique in the film, related to our roles as watchers. The significance of *gaze* is paramount in this film. Jesus's eye (the other is smashed shut early on) fixes on those around him, Judas the betrayer, Peter the denier, Mary the helpless, tortured mother, her fate inextricably bound to her son's pain (why does God do this to his handmaid?). Jesus looks too on those who hurt him, interrogate him, scream abuse at him. It is his eye we discern in the tomb.

I admired (I won't say I 'liked' anything about this film) the supernaturalism of the film. I enjoyed the way the devil stalked about, going to and fro upon the earth, the devil's own kingdom, a devil intimately known to Jesus. They understood each other. I was moved (I think) by the God's eye view of the cross and what I understood to be the tear that falls from the eye of the grieving Father as the first drop of rain in the storm, when literally, all hell breaks loose.

Theologically, it made me think about a number of things. In the film, the Incarnation is the descent of Christ into a world already a Bosch's hell. Judas commits suicide to *escape* the demonic curse under which he lives. Jesus undergoes the torment of hell in order to liberate us from it for we see the devil howling in an emptiness. Who killed Jesus? The Jews? The Romans? *God* killed Jesus. Abraham unrestrained. The Son is not given, but *sent* to death. The mission of Christ includes this fear, abandonment, suffering, punishment, death. The Father's will is implacable. 'You would have no authority over me, except it were given you from above'. Mere human politics could not make this happen. And this is not an outcome of the natural world, but the supernatural world: Jesus as some ultimate Exorcist sent to take the rap.





I thought again about the word 'forgive' coming from the cross. Is it prayer request or command? Is it, even then, local or universal? Does the Word spoken, then, make it actual, that we hear ourselves forgiven? And though I didn't like the resurrection scene, which seemed to me a bit Terminator-like (wouldn't the risen Christ at least permit himself a smile?), it made me think about an old problem: if he still bore the marks of the nails and the wound in his side, where did all the other lacerations, dislocations and ruined flesh go?

It seemed to me that for people unacquainted with the Christian story, much of the film would not make sense. If you have no Bible, then what could you make of Jesus bruising the serpent's head with his heel, his consciousness of the dove fluttering above him, the flashbacks to the Last Supper, the washed hands, the washed feet? The irony of Simon of Cyrene complaining that he is 'an innocent man'. The man in front of me at the cinema commented, when the crucifixion nails were hammered over 'He's not coming down off there, then' as if this was what he was waiting for. (So who hammered the nails out again?) When he left, this same man commented to his wife 'that was worse than *Dawn of the Dead*. Way over the top!'

Indeed.

