Gibson's gospel: The Passion of the Christ

by James M. Wall in the April 6, 2004 issue

Hollywood insiders were convinced that *The Passion of the Christ* would be a major flop. Mel Gibson's detractors predicted he would lose the $25 million he personally invested in the film. But only two weeks after it opened, *The Passion* had earned $200 million. Apparently Gibson, a Catholic pre–Vatican II traditionalist, has tapped into a Zeitgeist known as the culture war.

Conservative newspaper columnist Pat Buchanan led the praise chorus: "Gibson's *Passion* gives us a Lenten masterpiece, a beautiful moving work of art. To cradle Catholics who can recite the lines of each episode before they are uttered, it is faithful to the Gospels, to the Stations of the Cross, to the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary."

Buchanan introduced the phrase "culture war" at the 1992 Republican National Convention when he warned, "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the cold war itself."

Buchanan's prediction was correct: the culture war has been a part of every presidential campaign since 1992. "Guns, God and gays," as Howard Dean put it, will again be dominant themes in the 2004 presidential campaign. President Bush's proposed constitutional amendment barring gay marriage is already providing him with energized troops eager to campaign for his reelection. These people, most of them not regular moviegoers, have embraced Gibson's film. Based on the group sales in the theaters, it is clear that evangelical Protestants are among the film's strongest supporters.

Gibson has joined a national debate on the side of conservative leaders like Representative Tom DeLay (R., Tex.), who has said he is "on a mission from God to promote a biblical worldview" in American politics. Evangelical Protestants do not share the Catholic sensibility that permeates Gibson's film, but never mind religious differences—this is a major motion picture that celebrates the underlying religious narrative that fuels their side of the culture war.

Most critics have agreed that *The Passion's* major flaw is its excessive violence and prolonged torture scenes. But art is always in the eye and soul of the beholder, which is why these excesses do not disturb those lining up to celebrate Gibson's dark film. And, in spite of the excesses, there is much to admire in Gibson's work.

He opens the film in the misty blue half light of an approaching dawn. A doubting, writhing man pounds his head against the ground. He is at prayer, haunted by a devilish adversary, who whispers that he should give up this folly; no one man could possibly save the world.

When Jesus speaks, his words are in subtitled Aramaic, the language of Jesus' day—a choice that gives familiar biblical phrases a first-century documentary authenticity. Jesus' earlier life is briefly seen in flashbacks, including one humanizing scene (not from any of the Gospels) in which Jesus engages in a playful tea break with his mother—a break that shows Jesus as a young carpenter with a wacky sense of humor, not unlike a young Mel Gibson clowning around in *Lethal Weapon*.

The film's primary focus is on the Passion, which Gibson introduces with Isaiah 53:5: "He was wounded for our transgressions, [and] by his wounds we are healed." Through the centuries this sentence has been sung and celebrated, preached and taught, but Gibson wants more. At several points the camera fills the screen with Jesus'

face, his blood-soaked head twisted to the side, one eye swollen shut by thuggish blows.

These moments are medieval in artistic style, and reminiscent of the portrayal of the brutalized Jesus by 16th-century German artist Matthias Grünewald, whose Isenheim Altarpiece shows Christ in agony. Modern viewers will find that these scenes continue well beyond the point of endurance or artistic purpose, but Gibson's images are consistent with his belief that Christ died for our sins only after being painfully brutalized.

Gibson is also reported to have been influenced by the mystic visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, a 19th-century nun whose dreams took her back to the first century where she claims to have witnessed Jesus' actual suffering. The Gospels are sparse in their descriptions of the flogging and punishment, so Gibson turns back to Emmerich and Grünewald to reinforce his vision of the Passion.

Writer Andrew Sullivan describes the film as pornographic, "the reduction of all human thought and feeling and personhood to mere flesh." And it is certainly true that for long stretches of time sadistic Roman soldiers, reeling from drink, are locked in an obscene embrace of brutality with their helpless prisoner.

There are many reasons to dislike this film, including Gibson's insensitive insistence on Jewish culpability and the prolonged scenes of brutality. But these objections aside, *The Passion* needs to be seen for what it is: a film by a director who is both a "braveheart" and a "patriot," to recall two previous Gibson films that also included Christlike figures in settings of excessive danger and physical suffering. Conservatives in the culture war have found their muse in a most unlikely place: Hollywood, the spiritual center of secularism.