Excruciating Love—Is 52:13-53:12

It has been several years since I last watched Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*. Probably many of you saw the film, at least once, at least almost all the way through. Some people couldn’t watch it all the way through. Some people managed to watch right up to the point when the Roman soldiers began to scourge Jesus, right up to the moment when those metal spikes first dig in to Jesus’ flesh, and begin to pull.

Gibson definitely has a preference for his heroes to be bloodied messes, to show great valor in the midst of great suffering for a great cause—freedom. Gibson’s version of the passion story reflects his great love for freedom. The film is a graphic contemplation of the sacrifice involved in winning freedom, a feature typical of Gibson’s films. I also want to suggest that Gibson’s many bloody heroes are evocations of one hero, the one who suffered grievously to win freedom for us all. Gibson’s presentation of Christ, then, is not simply in line with all his other heroes; the depictions of all his other heroes have been inspired by Christ.

What Gibson’s film did so well that many could not bear to watch, so well that many, even today, cannot bear to watch, so well, that even today, what I remember most vividly from that film is the blood and the bloodied body of Jesus—what Gibson did so well was to force us to see the suffering.

He does not allow us to pass over the blood, to turn our eyes from the violence done to our Lord. Gibson took very seriously the words of Isaiah: “so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals” (52:14).

That same prophecy tells us, as you heard this evening, that the servant “shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high” (52:13). I’ve always heard that two ways, for Christ was lifted up—on the cross, for all to see, for all to mock and for all to weep. We do not see that lifting up as exaltation or prospering. It is through that suffering, however, through that self-giving sacrifice, that sacred self-offering, that Christ is truly exalted, truly lifted up, very high.

From the worst event imaginable comes the greatest event unimaginable: not only the resurrection and empty tomb—staggeringly amazing as these surely are. Not that only, but also redemption: redemption of human lives, redemption of the world, redemption of the cosmos. Without that cross, without that blood, we would not be in Christ, Christ would not be in us, we would still be in our sins, and we and all creation would be bound to death still.

Isaiah tells us that the servant was despised and rejected. Many people, even in our own community, do not accept that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. That’s nonsense to them, wishful thinking.

The key difference now, I suppose, is that many of these people also reject God, the existence of God, the idea of God, the claim that God has any claim upon them. They don’t know God and they don’t care about God. We all know people like this, even among our friends, even within our family. And Christ died for them, and lives to call them into life.

There’s not much in Christ nailed to the cross that would cause people to love him or to want to follow him. If following him means ending up like that, there—forget it. What so many of those people don’t realize—or do!—is that they are already there: the world has already crushed them; life has already crushed them. Like Christ on the cross, there they are, defeated, broken, miserable. They see themselves as others saw the servant, so shameful that others couldn’t bear to look at him. In some way, we see ourselves in Jesus on the cross, another hopeless ruin, another of life’s wrecks, and it is very difficult for us to look, painful.

But brothers and sisters, without that cross, without that blood, we would not be in Christ, Christ would not be in us, we would still be in our sins, and we and all creation would be bound to death still. Look to the cross and, for a moment, see Jesus there, bloodied and dying, because of you, for you, for love of you, with unimaginable compassionate mercy for you. How horrible, how awful, how full of awe! See Christ’s blood, freely flowing, yet do not be like those who did not understand,

like those who, even now, today, do not understand: that flowing blood is life for you; that blood is God forgiving you; that blood is God’s love pouring out upon you, over you, through you, to raise you up, to bring you home.

To eyes that look without faith, Jesus was surely cursed by God. To faithful eyes, Christ bloodied on the cross, that rough wood stained by Christ’s pricelessly precious blood, is the most sorrowful, most wonderful sight we can conceive. There, Jesus takes upon himself all our burden, all the weight of all that weighs us down, down to the dust, down to darkness, down to death. Our ruined life, our wrecked hope. “Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (53:5b).

Many cannot bear to look. Many refuse to see. Several of my fellow seminary students were so repulsed by the very idea that Christ’s sufferings had any redeeming value for anyone that they rejected what Isaiah tells them. Isaiah says quite plainly that the servant’s life is “an offering for sin” (53:10b). They said no. They could only see Christ’s passion—which means suffering—as an atrocious act of human injustice. A cosmic travesty. And it is that! Isaiah also tells us, “By a perversion of justice he was taken away” (53:8a)!

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is all the evidence we need of the sinfulness of this world.

And this world still stands condemned, for the world would do no differently today. The world will always seek to kill Christ. Worldly thinking and worldly values will always try to extinguish Christ.

This day we commemorate, this Good Friday, is a yearly reminder that the world did kill Jesus. This day forces us, each year, to see what we’re up against. This day forces us each year to stop lying to ourselves and recognize the inevitable result of worldly thinking, worldly values. Good Friday humbles me, crushes me, leaves me naked and defenseless, just as God intended it should.

And God, through Isaiah, foretold long ago, centuries before the events there on Calvary, not only those events, but also their outcome. “Out of his anguish he shall see light” (53:11a). The anguish is not the end. He shall see light. He who was light, who is light, shall see light and be light, our light. Even today, this blackest day, we see more than pain and death. We see through the darkness. We glimpse the promise of light.

It’s hard to see anything other than all that blood! But it is the blood, his blood, his pricelessly precious blood, beloved, that makes us whole, healed, righteous in God’s sight, for the sake of the blood of His precious Son. Without that cross, without that blood, we would not be in Christ, Christ would not be in us, we would still be in our sins, and we and all creation would be bound to death still. Isaiah tells us the servant “shall make many righteous” (53:11c).

I hope God cuts you to the heart as you contemplate what Jesus suffered, what we did to him, what happened to him because of us, our sin, our stubborn willfulness, our disobedience, our inveterate, maddening preference for our own way over God’s way, our too easy conviction that what we want is certainly what God also wants, but I also hope that, as you contemplate Christ’s bloodied body hammered into that heavy cross, and afterwards laid in that cold, dark, hard tomb, that you also begin to perceive inexplicable beauty, unexpected grace, and surprising depths of peace.

Of all the things Jesus might have done on the cross, probably the most surprising, astonishing thing he does is pray, pray for those who are causing his blood to flow, to run down, soaking the dust: he asks his Father to forgive them. He “made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). That’s what he’s doing. Do you know who those transgressors are? Me. You. Do you know for whom Jesus is praying, there, bleeding, dying? You. Me. Do you know who is being forgiven, there? And aren’t you sad? And aren’t you glad?

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!