

Not many movies require an actor to learn Aramaic and be covered in fake blood. But one film did. Released back in 2004, the movie received three Academy Award nominations. It was extremely bloody and violent, and it did very well at the box office, grossing more than \$600 million. Surprisingly, it was not a horror movie. Instead, it was a religious movie.

Can you guess what it is? If you guessed, *The Passion of the Christ*, then you are correct and you are probably aware that it was written and directed by Mel Gibson. The movie portrays the life and death of Jesus, particularly the last 12 hours of his life. The scenes of Jesus being flogged and crucified are presented in graphic detail, and they are very hard to watch. In fact, I must admit that seeing it once in the theater was enough for me.

But did you know that Gibson is actually working on a sequel, which will be called *The Passion of the Christ: Resurrection*. Apparently, the film will focus on the three days between the death and resurrection of Jesus. The actor playing Jesus for a second time, Jim Caviezel a native to Mount Vernon, says that it is “going to be the biggest film in history. It’s that good!”

Now, in case you weren’t aware, the word “passion” comes from the Latin word *passio*, which means “suffering.” We sometimes forget this when we speak about romantic passion, or the passion that someone has for a hobby or sports activity. The root of the word passion is suffering, which was made very clear in *The Passion of the Christ*.

Today’s gospel lesson from Mark says that when Jesus encountered a large crowd, “he had compassion for them.” This verse does not come from his last 12 hours before his crucifixion. Instead, it comes from a time much earlier, when Jesus was performing his ministry in a region called Galilee. And if a movie about that time period was made it could easily be called, *The Compassion of the Christ*.

Not Passion, but Compassion. Compassion is such an important word in Scripture, and it doesn't take long for us to figure out what it means. *Passio* means "suffering" and the prefix "*com*" means "with." Put the two together and you get "with suffering" or "suffering with." Jesus shows compassion towards the people around him, which means that he "suffers with" them.

At the beginning of this morning's narrative Jesus and his disciples had been traveling the countryside, casting out demons and curing the sick. In fact, they had been working so hard that they couldn't find time to grab a bite to eat. So, Jesus calls the apostles to hop into a boat with him and go away to a deserted place across the Sea of Galilee to enjoy some rest and relaxation.

But their plans are quickly derailed. The desperately needy people of the region see where Jesus is heading and hurry on ahead of him. When his boat hits ground, there is a huge crowd waiting for him. Although Jesus is weary, he somehow avoids being annoyed that his much-deserved day off is being interrupted. He isn't irritated that these people are unable to help themselves. He isn't even frustrated that the need all around him is so enormous. No, Jesus has compassion for them. He "suffers with" them. It's *The Compassion of the Christ*, after all.

Switching languages, we can go even deeper. The gospel of Mark was written first in Greek, and the Greek word for compassion is more graphic than the Latin word. It means to be moved by something so strongly that you feel it deep in your stomach, deep in your bowels, deep in your guts. Jesus has a sympathetic awareness of the distress of people around him, combined with a strong desire to alleviate it. He feels compassion not just in his heart, but in his guts.

Mark tells us that he has compassion because the people are "like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." Jesus becomes their Good Shepherd, the one who invites the people "to sit down in groups on the green

grass.” He is just like the Lord of Psalm 23, who makes his sheep “lie down in green pastures.” Jesus is the Good Shepherd predicted by the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, the one who teaches his people, provides them with food, and heals their sick and injured. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd,” promises Isaiah; “he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

Our Good Shepherd has come to us in Jesus, and that is truly good news. But it leaves us with a set of questions to answer: Do *we* have the compassion of the Christ? Are we willing to “suffer with” the hurting people around us? Do we feel the compassion of Jesus in our guts?

Even though the United States is a wealthy country, 44.2 million Americans are unable to acquire enough food to meet their needs. One in 8 households experienced food insecurity or a lack of access to an affordable, nutritious diet in 2023, which is higher than the pre-pandemic rate in 2019. Tragically, households with children are more likely to face hunger than households without children. As we contemplate that number, perhaps it would do us some good to remember that when Jesus faces a hungry crowd, he feeds them. Simple as that. In fact, the only miracle he performs in all four of the gospels is the feeding of hungry people. He feels compassion for them and acts on it.

Perhaps you remember the Little Free Libraries that were popular a few years ago? People would put house-shaped boxes outside their homes, businesses or churches and fill them with books for people to borrow. During the pandemic, some of those libraries were turned into Little Free Pantries and then filled with food for hungry neighbors to take. Canned goods and other non-perishable food were picked up throughout some very difficult months, and then replenished by caring people who kept their eyes on the pantries. Such people were acting with the compassion of the Christ.

Jesus also makes a point of healing people. After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee again. When they land at Gennesaret, the people of the region recognize Jesus and bring their sick on mats to wherever he is. In a variety of villages, cities and farms, the sick beg to touch the fringe of his cloak. Mark tells us that all who touch it are healed.

Jesus does his healing in villages, cities and farms, among the rich and the poor, the undeserving and the deserving, adults and children. All who come into contact with his cloak are healed. Which begs the question, how can we be the cloak of Jesus today? What are we doing to feed and heal the people in our community spiritually and physically? How are we feeling compassion in our guts for the neediest in our midst?

After my divorce, one of the things I decided to do was to find a way to volunteer at a local organization. I figured it would do me some good to get out of the house and deep down I believed that if I was able to help others it would also help me. So, I began to serve at Tri-Parish food bank at St. Charles Catholic Church in Burlington. On Saturday mornings, if I didn't have a funeral or church activity, I would go there and help feed the people who came to the drive through food pantry, by helping with their parking lot ministry. It has been almost 2 years, and I continue to go back because the compassion I feel for those who come for help, has also helped me.

As disciples of Christ, our challenge is always to suffer with people, as Jesus does — people who are young and old, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, moral and immoral. Jesus looks around and sees that the people around him are sheep without a shepherd, so he teaches them and feeds them and heals them. Jesus feels compassion deep in his guts and helps everyone — without discrimination and without asking why they need help in the first place. This point is important, because there are some people today who are quick to pass

judgment on people who are homeless, poor, or ill with one of the “diseases of poverty” — tuberculosis, malaria, and AIDS.

There is much we can do to help as we join Jesus in feeling compassion deep in our guts. We can stock food in Little Free Pantries or volunteer at a food bank. We can support domestic free clinics or international Christian mission efforts focused on preventing tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS. Good efforts are underway to prevent these diseases and treat their victims, and Christian hospitals continue to be the source of much of the available healthcare in areas of maximum poverty.

Wherever Jesus went, says Mark, needy people “begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.”

Yes, *all* who touched it were healed. Jesus healed everyone, without discrimination. Wherever Jesus went, he suffered with people and did what he could to help them. Our challenge is to assist people in the very same way, with the compassion of the Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen!