

# The Passion of the Christ

A review by Rev. Bob Matton

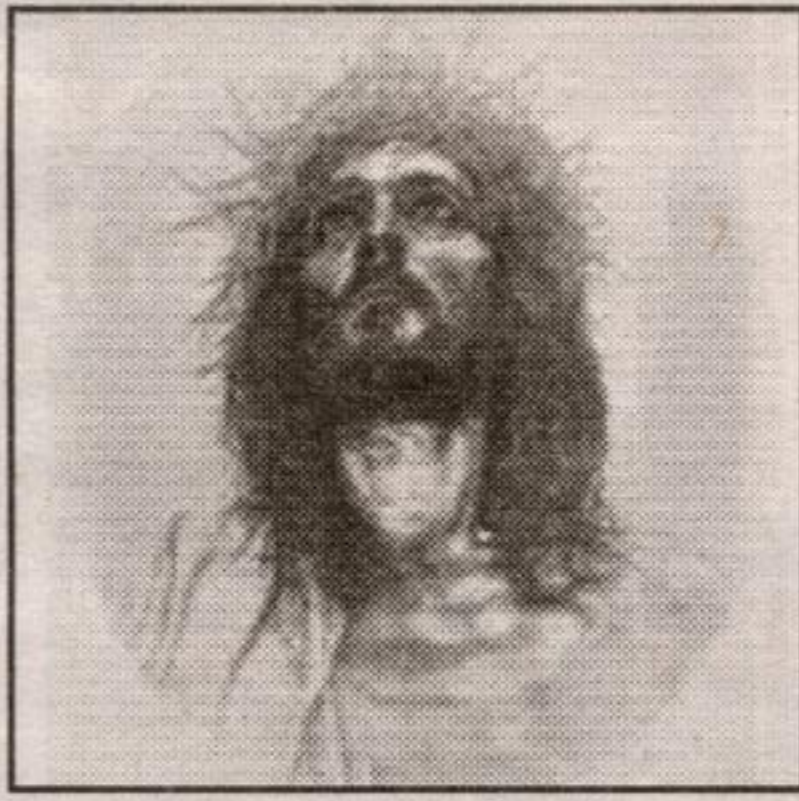
In many respects the season of Lent represents a challenging time for those who follow the Christian faith, as we bear witness to the ministry of Jesus in growing confrontation with the principalities and powers that have been and continue to be, a spiritual journey that in many respects may be described as a **prelude to passion**. It calls us, as followers of Jesus and the Gospel he has proclaimed, at least in the Spirit, to embody the way of the cross—to take up our cross and follow him who laid down his life for the people he called his friends.

As illustrated by the full houses of worship for Easter Sunday as compared to the generally meagre attendance at Good Friday services, we tend to respond best to a "triumphalist faith" in contrast with our distinct uneasiness—indeed avoidance—towards the causes and circumstances that contributed to Christ's passion, including his arrest, torture, crucifixion, and death.

By now most if not all will have heard of—and perhaps some will have seen—*The Passion of The Christ*, that since its debut has generated its fair mix of excitement and controversy in its powerful and disturbing depiction of Jesus' last 12 hours, a story usually restricted to the margins of our faith.

Figuring to get a leg up on the debate that will undoubtedly sow its own seeds of controversy in our churches and community as in others, while personally confessing some initial misgivings concerning the overt influence of director Mel Gibson's own theology and the way this film is being promoted as a proselytizing tool, this past Saturday I decided to see this movie for myself.

First and foremost, I must emphasize that this is not a film for the faint or weak of heart, as witnessed by reports of heart attacks suffered and at least one death; nor is it a film a responsible parent should take even the most mature child under age 13. As a *defacto* warning to movie patrons of what is to come, the film opens with a brief quotation from the prophet Isaiah's description of "the suffering servant" (53:5) often cited in describing Jesus' passion: "But he was wounded



for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed."

Not discounting the fact that, according to the various scriptural accounts on which the movie is based, the events described are in no way to be confused with "a walk in the park," the content is disturbing and violent in the extreme. As one all-too-well acquainted with the increasing degree of gratuitous violence too familiar to movies over my lifetime, I have to admit closing my eyes at least a couple times during this movie.

In contrast with most movies, at the end of this show people left the theatre in silence. As one source of controversy, the graphic and unrelenting violence perpetrated against Jesus—beating, whipping, scourging (in which flesh and blood fly), and ultimately crucifixion—were an assault not only upon the man but the senses of the viewers.

In many respects, given its singular focus on the abuse, degradation, and exploitation of the story's central character, I have to agree with at least one critic's indictment that on this basis it may be argued to represent a form of pornography.

However, concerning the charges of blatant anti-Semitism that have been the major source of controversy, I have to agree with those who have defended the film, including actor Kevin Costner who attributed the its depiction of the injustice and violence perpetuated against Jesus as an indictment, not of the Jewish people, but of a mob mentality, that repeatedly throughout history has reared its ugly head, and against which we all must remain vigilant.

While the film's portrayal of the corruption and misappropriation of power by certain Pharisees in plotting to

have Jesus killed, lest his truth undermine their position, can be said to have many parallels in both religious and secular contexts to this day, I would counter that the film also fairly depicts that Jesus' Jewishness as well as the fact that many of his earliest supporters were Jewish, and that even some of his brutish Roman tormentors were ultimately converted.

As well, I can further commend the merit of having the actors speak exclusively in Hebrew and Aramaic, supplemented by English\* subtitles, such that I think gives the film a certain added realism.

Finally, in my opinion, although some churches are promoting this film as expressing an evangelistic message of "the power of God's love," with too few exceptions—although they are notable—I contend that the primary message concerns the obstacle posed by our fallenness as human beings, expressed in our brutality and inhumanity. I believe its real challenge to us as Christians should be to reflect and act upon how the subject of this film, both powerfully and violently presented, speaks to and challenges us to address the sin of the world and the presence of evil. Not by pointing the finger at others who for whatever reason we believe to be and to do wrong in our eyes, but to more directly confront the shadow side of ourselves—that which witnesses to death rather than resurrection.

In conclusion, all said and done, with a cautionary advisory due to the high level of violence, this reviewer would give *The Passion of The Christ* three out of five stars.

Rev. Robert Matton is a former minister at Trinity United Church, Acton, and Alma United Church. He is currently pursuing other interests.

# Eric Walters visits MSB

Renowned author Eric Walters visited students at McKenzie-Smith Bennett Public School on Feb. 26 to exhibit his books and give uplifting speeches for the writers in all of us.

From Brampton the teacher started his presentation by telling the audience a little about himself. He works at the Mississauga hospital in the emergency department as a social worker. He deals with deaths, suicides, attempted suicides, "All the fun stuff," he says.

Mr. Walters also is a sports fanatic, particularly about basketball, and includes his athletes in his books (*Three on Three, Rebound*, etc.)

Being an environmentalist and humanitarian, Mr. Walters shared some stories from his childhood in Toronto, ranging from stray cats to eagles. He also told tales about his late father's military days during World War 2 in British Columbia.

He went on to explain some of the frustrations he experienced as an amateur writer. He involved volunteers in a demonstration that helped us to understand the disappointments he suffered. But he didn't give up, and passed on this information. "If you say I'm a winner, I am. If you say I'm a quitter, I will do everything to prove you wrong!"

Mr. Walters powerful stage presence was astounding to behold and made for a very enjoyable experience!

If you would like further information on Eric Walters, or would like him to present at your school, check out his website at [www.interlog.com/~ewalters/](http://www.interlog.com/~ewalters/).

Written by Aidan Hammond  
Class 81A



Author Eric Walters talks at MSB recently. -Submitted photo

**WHAT:**  
*THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST'... THE CONTROVERSY*

**WHERE:**  
ACTON TRINITY UNITED CHURCH,  
70 MILL ST. E., ACTON

**WHEN:**  
SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 10:00 A.M.

There is no doubt that the movie, 'The Passion of the Christ' has stirred up strong feelings in people. Even before it was released, it was being accused of being anti-Semitic and it raised fears that Jews would once again be accused of crucifying Jesus. When it was released on Ash Wednesday, some people have loved it. Others were moved to tears. Many were horrified at the graphic violence. At least one person in the community walked out part way through the showing. A number of people refuse to see it because of the violence.

The 'Passion' was a gamble that paid off for Mel Gibson. The weekend that it opened, it became the highest grossing movie release of the year. As it continues to be shown in theatres, some obvious questions need to be asked. Is it anti-Semitic? Does it glorify violence? What was Mel Gibson's purpose in making it in the first place?

These questions, and others, will be addressed in a forum on March 21 as part of Trinity United Church's Sunday service. It is for those who have seen the movie, those contemplating seeing it, or for the simply curious. Anyone in the community is invited to attend. Refreshments and opportunities for questions and discussion will follow the service.



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