



A Reflection Guide to the Movie "The Passion of the Christ"

On Ash Wednesday, 2004, the movie "The Passion of the Christ" opened to rave reviews— and controversy. Many Christian and Jewish leaders expressed concern that this movie might set back Jewish-Christian relations.

Dramatic depictions of the passion story have sometimes had a history of tragic consequences. Inflamed by such depictions, some viewers have labeled Jews "Christ-killers," which, in turn, has sometimes led to acts of violence against Jews. The Interfaith Relations Commission of the National Council of Churches USA, concerned about any possible rise in anti-semitism and seeking to foster genuine and constructive dialogue with Jews, last year provided this viewing guide to serve as a launching pad for reflection among Christians.

The movie is now in an edited re-release, and again the need arises to consider carefully how it depicts Judaism and how it could impact relationships with our Jewish brothers and sisters. To that end the Commission's 2004 viewing guide is being re-released, as background and discussion-starter for your individual and group reflection.

Background

1. The story powerfully impacts our faith.

This story is deeply meaningful to us. An opportunity to enter the pathos of the last 12 hours of our Lord's life on earth can be a powerful experience of faith. It can also have a significant evangelistic impact.

2. Jesus was born a Jew and lived as a Jew to the end.

Although Christians seldom recognize its significance, Jesus was a Jew. In his criticisms of his contemporary Judaism, he stood squarely in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, calling his own people and religious institutions to their noblest essence. One of the hallmarks of his ministry was proclaiming the good news of God's love to the poor, the sick, tax collectors and sinners. This special calling to love the "other," to which he calls us as well (for instance, in the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself"), Jesus received from his Jewish tradition.

3. Who killed Jesus?

The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, seeing him as a threat to the peace of Jerusalem, condemned Jesus to be killed by Roman soldiers under his authority. Some among the Jewish priestly establishment called for Jesus' death, though the vast majority of Jews did not. At the same time his disciples abandoned him.

No one today will pick a fight with a Christian (descending from the disciples) because they abandoned him. The Roman Empire does not exist anymore. But sometimes Jews who are our neighbors today are recipients of violence because they are seen as descendants of those who were against Jesus.

Suggestions for Individual and Group Reflections

1. Read at least two Gospel accounts of the Passion.

Be attentive to your own emotional response to the story. What responses is each Biblical author seeking to evoke in the reader?

2. Read a reputable introduction or commentary to the Passion stories to locate the religious and political context of the Gospel writers.

What do you learn from these readings about:

- How the early Christians related to Jewish communities?
- How the Gospel writers portray the relation of Jews to Jesus' suffering and death?

3. Consider Jesus' agonized petition from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do?" Did he mean....

- Roman authorities?
- Jewish religious leaders?
- Disciples who fled?
- All humanity?

How does your answer impact your relationship with those who are "other"?

4. Discuss in your group how the movie "The Passion" portrays Jews.

- What would Jesus, who called us to love our neighbor as ourselves, say about the movie's portrayal?
- Many Christian and Jewish leaders are concerned that decades of constructive Jewish-Christian relations will suffer a setback as a result of this movie. Do you agree?

5. Consider concrete and constructive steps you might take in your church and community to build or strengthen relationships with Jewish people and institutions.

Resources

A list of resources, including links to many internet-based materials, can be found at: <http://www.nccusa.org>. Scroll down and click 'Interfaith Relations' on the left frame. You may also go directly to the resources by entering the following link in your web browser: <http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifrhome.html>

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