

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has stirred controversy all across the country. Many Christians are hailing the movie as manna from heaven, a gift that will help evangelize the country. Other people criticize the film for its violence and purpose. Last week I joined several other local ministers in the studio of the local radio station, and we all encouraged listeners of the breakfast club to see the film, but to do more – talk to people about faith, go to church, and read the book on which the movie is based.

Some religious commentators have criticized the theology of the film. It shows Jesus as the son whom God sent in the world to be punished for the sins of humanity. The brutality of the movie shows the extent of humanity's sins for which Jesus had to pay. There are other ways to look at the meaning of Jesus' life. He came to save us, and he worked at this through his preaching and miracles, as well as by his suffering and death.

Others have said the violence is overdone. There are details in the scourging and the crucifixion that never appear in the bible. But of course even if it's only a couple of whippings and 3 nails, this is a violent story to tell.

Others criticize the movie's anti-semitism. There are lines in the gospels that sound anti-Semitic, and Christians have a tarnished history in our relationships with Jews. Many Jews are treated with compassion in the movie, but if a Jewish brother or sister said to me, "I find this offensive," I would listen to them.

The controversy is good. It is making people talk about religion, what they believe, and the purpose of Jesus' life and death. That conversation will be very healthy for our country. It is rare that a film of such religious importance hits mainstream theatres. Very often Christians and the Catholic Church in particular take a hit in the movies. Many values we hold are not represented in film: for example, seeking nonviolent solutions to problems, the restriction of sexual activity to married life, and even that good should triumph over evil. In our society, Hollywood freely preaches its gospel in a well-endowed marketplace. In public places, the 10 commandments and nativity scenes cannot be displayed. But at a state university in Kansas, it is permissible to display an image of a bishop that many Catholics find offensive. Because Christianity struggles to go mainstream with our message, I still applaud the movie and hope that it does make people ask questions about Jesus.

My major criticism of the film is that there is more to the story. It does conclude with a brief vision of the resurrection, which is more than *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* ever did. But St. Paul says to the Philippians in the passage we hear today, Christ "will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body." "Our citizenship is in heaven." Our minds are not occupied with earthly things. We are barely into the penance of Lent before the gospel gives us a vision of resurrection in the transfiguration of Jesus.

As we go through this season, we will accept sufferings and penance, just as Jesus did on the cross. But also as Jesus did, we will rise again, if we what drives our suffering is love.