

TRDL6021: JESUS THROUGH FAITH AND CULTURE

Jesus of Hollywood

Despite the availability of four gospel accounts, we actually know very little about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet Jesus has remained a 'leading man' in the cinema almost from its very inception. Two significant points arise from this. First, cinema emerged as a primary form of entertainment at the very point in history when biblical scholarship was assessing the 'quest of the historical Jesus' (Schweitzer, 1906: ET, 1911). Schweitzer concluded that it was impossible to construct an accurate biography of Jesus and that attempts to do so tended to reveal more about the author than about the Nazarene. While subsequent New Testament scholarship has been less pessimistic, it remains the case that those who tell the story will often colour the portrayal of Jesus' life with their own agendas. Second, it can be claimed with a fair degree of confidence that modern culture has assimilated the Jesus story more through the cinematic portrayals than through the gospels themselves. In other words, modern people will know more about Jesus from the cinema than from the Bible. Thus, according to William R. Telford, the Jesus film is 'probably now the most significant medium through which popular culture has absorbed the gospel message and formed its view of the founder of Christianity'. Indeed, the famous Hollywood director, Cecil B. De Mille, claimed that 'probably more people have been told the story of Jesus of Nazareth through *The King of Kings* than through any other single work, except the Bible itself' (Telford, 1997: 120).

There may be some theological justification for this. In order for Jesus to 'live' in the present, he must in some way 'speak' to and from the society in which we find ourselves. If the risen and ascended Lord exists as a living presence in the church, there can be little doubt that he can be understood according to modern categories and his significance can be outlined in modern terms. However, this has tended to give rise to the idea that a distinction should be made between the Jesus of faith and the Jesus who has become a cultural icon (Pelikan, 1999). The latter belongs to the wider culture, to those of faith and those of none, and it is the portrayal of this icon that the cinema seeks to accomplish.

Some of this can be refuted. Jesus only exists as a cultural icon because he initially became the object of faith. He would not have been known in the wider society at all unless he had first been known as saviour in Palestine among the disciples and in the church. Yet some of this must be confirmed. If Jesus is the redeemer of humankind then humankind in all its fulness must in some senses be redeemed in him. This includes aspects of culture. And if the Jesus story is shown to take on new relevance because it is able to engage with the concerns of a particular time and place, then this may simply reflect the fact that he continues to act as the redemptive figure.

There are three sets of problems associated with the Jesus film it of which we should be aware:

1. The problem of doctrine

Christology: According to the classic Christological doctrines of the Church, enshrined in the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian definition, Jesus was of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father; he is one person (*hypostasis*) of the Holy Trinity; and in him the fullness of humanity and divinity dwell, two natures in one person. How on earth can this be portrayed in a film? It is possible that portraying the resurrection, the incarnation, Jesus' filial consciousness and the miracles will assist in this.

Soteriology: To what extent can a film demonstrate the doctrinal understanding of the work of Christ (i.e., the salvation of the world)? Elements to consider here could include the portrayal of sacrifice, atonement, victory over sin, evil and death, or his moral example and how Jesus' teaching is portrayed

2. The problem of realism

How should Jesus be portrayed? We know nothing about his appearance, yet we may expect there to be something special about him, something attractive or charismatic. What about his chief characteristics? Is he active or passive, gentle, meek and humble, or doubting, manic and volatile? Jesus has been portrayed in all these ways in the various films about him.

How are the other characters portrayed? Do any of them play a prominent role? What about the disciples? Think about what we know about them from the gospels (which is not much). Does Peter get the most screen time? How is

John the Beloved Disciple portrayed? What about Judas? How are the women (Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha) portrayed?

How are the Romans and the Jews portrayed? Some gospel verses stress that while the Romans put him to death, it was 'the Jews' who conspired to make it happen and thus bear the greater responsibility. At the very least this has contributed to anti-Semitic activity over the centuries which calls for some circumspection in portraying the Scribes and the Pharisees. (It is worth noting here, for example, the controversy which arose following Mel Gibson's incorporation of the words of 'the Jews' from Matthew 27:25 in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The words were spoken in Arabic and were not translated in the subtitles, but concern was expressed all the same.)

Authenticity of location. Of course, we have no pictures of first century Palestine, though archaeological evidence has helped reconstruct aspects of the topography. It is worth asking where Jesus films were shot. For example, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) was shot in the mid-west frontier in the USA. Was it intentional that a parallel be drawn between the story of Jesus and the first settlers in that part of North America? Even if not, what conclusions could be drawn from identifying a factor such as this?

In all these things, we should be aware that there are no 'right' answers even if there appear to be some that are wrong. In other words, we know that Jesus should have appeared as a typical Jewish male of around 30 years of age from the region of Palestine. But that does not give us very much to go on: even if it is unlikely that he was a white-skinned, blue-eyed, fair-haired Arian of Hollywood misrepresentation.

Equally we could say similar things about the representation of Judas (who, for obvious reasons, gets a bad press in the New Testament), Peter (who gets a reasonably good press, possibly because he is behind some of the information), the Romans (who actually did the dirty deed of killing him), the Jews (who get the blame).

3. Cinematic problems

Is Jesus in fact a suitable character to be a leading man in a film? He is (traditionally) considered to be asexual and pacifist; two attributes that go against the grain in Hollywood with its predilection for sex and violence. This

results in a certain concentration on other characters in the story, particularly on Judas, Barabbas, Peter and Mary Magdalene.

What issues are involved in choosing an actor to portray Jesus?

Hollywood demands that well-known actors take the stage in order to make the film a success. But not all 'big name' actors would be suitable. William R. Telford, for example, suggests that Arnold Schwarzenegger or Danny De Vito would be unsuitable (Telford, 1997: 127).

No portrayal of Jesus is value-free or indeed devoid of interpretation. The gospels do not seek merely to outline his life. Instead, they seek to say something about him. The question which arises from the cinematic portrayals does not revolve around their historical accuracy – we can never be entirely sure about the details of his life as only the bare bones of a biography have been included in the New Testament. Instead we must ask what it is that the cinematic portrayals wish to relate about him. When we have discerned this, we can then go on to ask whether or not it is compatible with what we know about him from the gospels and from tradition as the redemptive figure who inaugurates the Kingdom of God.

Bibliography:

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