

Jesus in Thought and Culture

The Gospel According to St Matthew (Pasolini: 1964)

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964) has been the subject of considerable disagreement. Hailed by Lloyd Baugh as 'the masterpiece' (Baugh, 1994: 94), John R. May considers it a film 'that must rank with the very few successful lives of Christ that have been made' (May, 1982: 27). On the other hand, Stern et al claim 'We are not engaged in a "realistic" reconstruction of Jesus' life and times; rather, the gospel is being used for other, parallel purposes' – namely the promulgation of Marxist political views (Stern et al, 1999: 122), an opinion echoed by Peter Malone who says 'While Pasolini's reading is stark, a Jesus confronting authority and making serious demands on his followers (Jesus – Marxist?), it is not entirely the Jesus of the real Gospel according to Matthew' (Malone, 1990: 30).

What can account for the difference of opinion, where some see the film as remarkably true to the life of Christ as recorded in Matthew's gospel and others see it as a perversion of the gospel for political ends? Could it be that Pasolini had produced 'a disconcerting and scandalous novelty, because no-one expected a Christ like that; because no-one had read Matthew's Gospel'? (Telford, 1997: 122). One who might have thought this to be the case was Giovanni Cardinal Urbani, Archbishop of Venice, who viewed the film at its premiere at the Venice Film Festival in 1964. His immediate reaction was that 'Pasolini hasn't understood the Gospel. Jesus isn't like that.' Nevertheless, the Cardinal then read the gospel in one sitting, as Pasolini had done, and he subsequently retracted his former words. 'I realized, although he was a layman, Pasolini had projected Matthew's very same Jesus on the screen. With great fidelity, word for word.' Indeed, the International Catholic Film Office declared that: 'The author...has faithfully translated, with simplicity and piety, and often movingly, the social message of the Gospel, in particular love for the poor and the oppressed, while sufficiently respecting the divine aspect of Christ...his work is far superior to earlier, commercial films of the life of Christ. It shows the real grandeur of his teaching stripped of any artificial sentimental effect' (Baugh, 1997: 96).

There is certainly a compelling simplicity in this portrayal. The lack of professional acting, the stark surroundings, the use of various genres of music from classical to soul, and its shooting in black and white all conspire to draw the audience into the narrative in a way that Ray's film (*King of Kings*, 1961) never does. This is decidedly not an action film and parts are incredibly static, with Pasolini often focusing the camera on a single face (usually, but not exclusively, that of Jesus, played by a Spanish student, Enrique Irazoqui) or by slowly moving the camera, usually from left to right, over a particular scene which invokes the audience's memory of viewing large paintings or frescos. And yet, Jesus, in contrast with the way the film is shot, seems constantly to be on the move, leading the disciples on their journey through Palestine and usually speaking to them over his shoulder. The impression is gained of one who has little time to achieve what needs to be achieved, though many of the familiar stories and sayings are included in a structure which quite closely follows that of the written account. As Barnes Tatum observes: 'The film avoids the imaginative subplots and created conversations that mark so many of the Jesus films that preceded it. Virtually all incidents and dialogue in the film have their basis in the gospel text' (Tatum, 1997: 105).

Nevertheless, despite the clear claims to authenticity, Pasolini, like Nicholas Ray (whose *King of Kings* appeared in 1961) before him, does not simply tell the story of Jesus but *retells* it in a way that makes contemporary sense. There is clear evidence that Pasolini, Marxist, homosexual and perceived *enfant terrible* of the Catholic Italian establishment, has left his mark on the film. He made the film in Italy, saying that ‘I substituted an analogous people (the subproletariat of southern Italy) and for the landscape, I substituted an analogous landscape (the Mediterranean Italy of the deep south)’ (Baugh, 1997: 98). In some senses this is not so problematic. As William R. Telford notes: ‘Of the Christ of the cinema, therefore, as with the Johannine Christ, there is a sense in which it may be said that “He is in us, as we are in him”’ (Telford, 1997: 138). Indeed, Pasolini referred to his film as an ‘analogy’ where the story of Jesus was transferred ‘from the ancient world to the modern world without having to reconstruct it archaeologically or philologically’ (Tatum, 1997: 105). But perhaps there is a further aspect to this where Pasolini himself becomes an *alter Christus*, or else Christ becomes a means of portraying Pasolini’s own life. ‘I don’t believe I have ever created anything more my own, more perfectly measured to me, than the Gospel,’ he wrote (Baugh, 1997: 100). The film images not first century Palestine but the Italy of Pasolini’s day and even of his own life. The members of the establishment in the film were played by Pasolini’s artist and writer friends. Mary, Jesus’ mother, was played by Susanna Pasolini – the director’s mother. As Lloyd Baugh points out, ‘at the foot of the cross [she] is crying not only for the Jesus crucified but also for the son Pier Paolo “crucified” by the cultural, political and moral Pharisees of his generation’. His longtime companion, Ninetto Daroli, took a part in the film and the camera lingers on him as Jesus announces that the kingdom of heaven must be accepted with the faith of a little child (Baugh, 1997: 101).

Alongside this, we can see in this portrayal of Jesus some of the anger of the social reformer. Matthew’s gospel is, for Pasolini, the most worldly and revolutionary, with Matthew 10.34 proving formative in his approach to the life of Jesus: ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother’ (NRSV). His film is an attempt ‘to represent Christ as an intellectual in a world of poor people ready for revolution’. There is clearly an emphasis on Jesus’ opposition to the Scribes and Pharisees who imprison the people in excessive and impossible legal requirements. Not only this, but there is a definite attempt to portray the ordinary people as European peasants, all of whom bear the hardness and harshness of life on their faces. The result is that Jesus’ blessing of the poor, the subject of which is at best a matter of controversy, is thus brought into a contemporary setting. In such a context, Jesus is an ‘angry young man’. He is a ‘worried and harried teacher’, a social critic more than a religious rabbi. For some, this Jesus is cold and distant, hyperactive and yet not active. Paradoxically, this Jesus is in fact further removed from the people than the portrayal of Matthew. This Jesus is so ‘human’ that he is ‘inhuman’, the angry young man with divine powers who is alien and alienating (Grimshaw, 2001: 156; Telford, 1997: 135).

Pasolini’s film demonstrates a paradoxical tendency to appear authentic while also causing offence at its over-personalizing and surreptitious contextualization of the Jesus story. Nevertheless, the accusation of Marxism owes more to the pathological fear of socialist politics emanating from the Vatican during the Cold War and to the

knowledge of Pasolini's political convictions than to an exposition of the film itself. As Lloyd Baugh shrewdly comments: 'The point is, of course, not so much that we are in front of a Marxist Christ, as that he is not the gentle, all-loving Jesus of conventional Catholic iconography' (Baugh, 1994: 104-5). Nevertheless, this is more a matter of style than of content. Indeed, as Barnes Tatum says, there is no hint in the film that Jesus had political motives or posed a threat to the *status quo*. 'Ironically, Pasolini the Marxist has completely depoliticised the crucifixion' (Tatum, 1997: 111).

The result is a Jesus void of any power or mission. If the salvation he attempts to achieve is that of justice for the poor, then he is a total failure. Neither his death nor resurrection achieve anything like that. If this Jesus is Marxist, then the Marxist Jesus reveals little of soteriological significance. Although, as a cinematic spectacle, the portrayal of Jesus almost as a social reformer simply constructed around the words of Matthew's gospel remains strangely compelling, one is left feeling that both Christology and soteriology are absent from the film. As John McIntyre points out, 'the ultimate criterion by which any Christology is to be judged is the nature of the soteriology which it implies or allows' (McIntyre, 1998: 193).

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