

# ***The Passion of the Christ, Apocolypto, & Christmas***

by Fr. Dave Heney 2006

***Our world is in trouble. The problem is violence but an answer could come from these two movies. They reveal two ancient empires deeply rooted in the public display of violence. The Romans flogged Jesus and thousands of others, dragged them through public streets, and crucified them at the city gates precisely for everyone to see. Victims hung for days (unless there was a resurrection) as food for dogs and to***

The ancient world considered violence its own justification ...if you won. The Mayans killed losers outright, ritually sacrificed them, or as an added bonus, used them as slaves. It was the public display of power that was considered great, and being a loser was reason enough that you somehow deserved it.

These films unveil the violence at the heart of two cultures whose ugly nature has been glorified by centuries of forgetfulness, and self-hating Western historians. Both films force us to see how they really were. Some still paint Mayans as a "peaceable kingdom" sadly ravished by brutish Europeans, and portray Rome as "weakened" by Christianity. What Christianity weakened was precisely that culture of violence. We recoil today at what they showcased. What made the change?

Jesus the Son of God became an innocent sacrificial victim at the hands of evil people ... reaffirming that all victimization is wrong. For those who came to believe that God is love, the passion of Jesus triggered *compassion* for innocent victims. Christianity slowly re-introduced a kind of natural recoil, perhaps lost since Cain slew Abel. (Apocolypto is dedicated to an "Abel") Mayans painted victims blue to separate them as "other." But Jesus became a victim precisely to show there is *no such person* as an "other." All are brothers and sisters.

Christianity can not change those who truly want violence, and we certainly have had our share of them, but it gradually made it harder to glorify. The crowd was slowly beginning to root for the victim. For the first time, people felt compelled to hide or even "justify" aggression by, ironically, naming themselves "victims." Both Crusaders and Saracens justified cruelty as a *defense* against aggression, as some in the Middle East still do. Compared to the ancient world, Christianity actually limited aggression. Its religious wars were considered shocking precisely

because they involved...*Christians*, who know better. No such shock by Romans at one million deaths in Gaul under Caesar nor were Mayans shocked at 10,000 human sacrifices in just one day. Even these do not equal the 100 to 120 million people killed in just the last century by the *atheistic non-Christian regimes* led by Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Yet even they felt the need to justify aggression to a now Christianized world as a victim nation's response to global threats.

Critics think Mel Gibson is revealing some personal dark side in his films. He is revealing a few things to be sure. For one, these grotesque scenes from Mayan and Roman culture actually happened. People really did these terrible things and thought they were *normal*, even *praiseworthy*. That we are so horrified today is a new moral development. Christianity has made a world that is, thankfully, horrified at violence, whether by Church leaders or prison guards in Iraq. We are as doomed as these ancient cultures if we become desensitized to violence, make it "palatable" in movies, admire violent sport stars, or glorify gang culture. Perhaps *The Passion* and *Apocolypto* provide an accurate but troubling glimpse into our past. Neither of these ancient cultures survived, thank God, so let each film remind us to return to our true God-given self that promotes human dignity and non-violence.

At Bethlehem, Christ arrives as a new born baby in trouble, triggering the truly deepest and oldest part of our self and what made us evolutionarily successful as humans; our compassion. Compassion for innocent victims rather than aggression is our way out of trouble. The recoil you feel at violence is a hopeful sign.