

Two Zen Men and a Christian at the Passion

by Dave Sloan

First published at *GodSpy*

I went to see *The Passion of the Christ* on opening day with one of my favorite Zen friends. Vincent is a twenty-something barista at the local Starbucks. During his breaks from work we talk about literature and girls and culture and dating and Buddhism and courtship and Christianity too. Zen meditation is his main spiritual practice, that and playing his guitar and piano and clarinet and I'm pretty sure he plays a few more instruments as well.

Last week I asked Vincent if he had plans to see the *Passion* movie and he asked if I would like to go with him and that's how we found ourselves sitting in the lobby of the theater waiting for the film to begin on opening day.

As we waited, Vincent asked what period of time in Jesus' life the film covered and whether Mel Gibson was in the film. I told him that it sounded like he just hadn't paid much attention to all of the hype leading up to the movie.

"Nope. I just wanted to see the movie and make a subjective judgment for myself, just like any other work of art. I didn't want to be influenced by what everyone else thinks about it. I've had some people put a lot of pressure on me about Christianity. And the people I hang out with a lot, they really don't pay much attention to Christianity because it's all like just one whole thing with all of the religions, you know; it's all the same to them. But I didn't want to be swayed either way, for or against it. I've been looking forward to seeing this movie and just making up my own mind about it. I'm excited. This gave me something to look forward to all day at work."

Right about then my cell phone rang. It was the friend I call "Greg the Buddhist." Greg leads a meditation group that sits for two hours at a time. He's also spent three months at a monastery in Kyoto, Japan. There, he went through monk-killer week, during which he meditated for eight straight days without lying down. We get together and talk about darn near anything and drink teas from places I've never heard of and can't pronounce.

Greg wanted me to go see the *Passion* movie with him. He said he'd been looking forward to it for weeks. I told him where Vincent and I were, and that he just had time to make it.

I can't imagine what it would have been like to see the movie alone. And I can't imagine what it would have been like to have seen the movie with fellow Christians. Because as I watched the movie it seemed so much that it was we three together who were watching. It was Greg and Vincent and me. I could feel their shoulders right there on each side of mine. I could feel them close. I care about these guys. They are fiercely honest in their seeking, in their struggles and in their passion for art and music and life and laughter. I knew that they would allow their hearts to be rent by this passion, this torture and killing. It was something that we shared together, even in our silence.

When it was finished we went to Waffle House. Greg says that Waffle House is a portal, an opening into the transcendent, the other-worldly, and that the people who work there are guides.

Greg and Vincent were meeting for the first time, so they began to talk about Zen stuff. They bandied about Japanese terms, speaking of concepts of desire and longing and detachment and comparing various sitting positions; and then they started asking questions about the movie.

"When did he do the miracles and the preaching and the sermon on the mount and that stuff? And what about the temptation, you know, like when Mick Jagger sings in *Sympathy for the Devil*, 'when Jesus Christ had his moment of doubt and shame,' what about that? And what about the religion, you know Christianity and all of that, when did it start? And those priests who walked out of the interrogation at the beginning because it was a fraud, where did they go and who were they? And do you think the torture was really that brutal? How can we really know that?"

I didn't answer all of their questions, but did address several to the best of my ability. And I explained how the early Church grew up in soil fertilized with the blood of thousands of martyrs. I explained that these martyrdoms often happened in front of thousands of people, in coliseums and other public places. On the basis of the many vivid accounts of these tortures we have no reason to doubt Gibson's representation of the torture inflicted upon the one for whom these martyrs died.

Vincent said he liked the movie, and wanted to see it again, and I asked him why. "Well, I think I was probably one of those people who say that Christianity has twisted the message of Jesus. But I didn't know what that message was."

"What do think that message is now, after seeing this movie?" I asked him.

"Well, let me make an analogy. It's like how the brain has so many wrinkles and folds, in order to have more surface area—there's so much more there than what you see. Or, maybe this is better. It's like a piece of paper with writing all over both sides, and then it's crinkled up into a ball. I was looking at the ball, and I only saw the marks on the outside of it, on the surface. Now I realize that that story we saw has all of these wrinkles and folds and that the message is written on them and tucked deep inside the core of what we see at first glance. I want to know what's in there, inside."

"I'll tell you something else," Vincent said, "but it's really not an analogy. It's kind of weird but maybe it fits. There's this girl I know, and she's a Christian, and she has a beauty that's entirely different from anything I've ever seen, and it seems like her beauty and what she believes are all wrapped up together. And that makes me want to be a better person. And this movie, and the way Jesus chose to go through all of that, it makes me want to be a better person. It's connected somehow. This girl, and who she is, and what happened in the movie, it's connected, and it's different from anything else I know. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do next. I don't know if I believe the stuff people say I'm supposed to believe, like accepting Jesus to be my savior and all of that stuff. I do want to see the movie again, though, definitely. And I'd like to go to Church with you sometime."

Greg said he was inspired by the movie, and I asked him how so.

"Well, Jesus' message and his life were the same. That's what inspired me. He had a code he lived by, a code of love and service and humility and he lived it. That takes courage. I have a

code too, and it's the same code Jesus had. But unlike him, I don't live up to my code. I break it all the time. I had a friend tell me that I'm the strangest holy man he's ever known, because I have a code and it means everything to me, and I break it. But Jesus was a man, clearly he was much more than a man, but he was also a man, and he kept his code. Even the thief on the cross could see that. He told that priest, 'Hey, He's praying for you.' Jesus, what he preached, his code, it was just exactly who he was. There was no difference."

We talked about teachings of the great Zen master, Fukushima Roshi, under whom Greg studies and practices. Greg wanted to know if Christianity is a philosophy or a religion or a Church. Roshi says Zen is a religion. I told Greg that Christianity is a person, and the person is that guy who crawled up onto the cross.

"It all seemed so unnecessary," Greg said. "All he had to do was answer those questions the way they wanted to hear and he could have saved himself. I kept finding myself saying, 'Oh, don't say that; they're giving you a way out,' but he stuck to his guns. The key thing is the way that a man of pure faith—what I'm trying to say is that everything that was happening to him was God's will and he aligned his will with it, right down to every last lash.

"William James says that religious true believers and crazy people can get pretty indistinguishable, and at times it looked like that. But I think it was the real deal; I'm a believer, I believe in it; I mean I believe in the purity of everything he did. I'm not considering him a nutcase or anything, though it can look like that on the surface. God is everything or nothing at all. I'm saying he's everything."

Greg and Vincent both plan to see the movie again, and so do I. I recommend this movie to every adult. However, I would make two recommendations. First, don't go alone. Jesus' passion is hard to bear and you'll need help to get you through.

My second suggestion is to pray. Pray whatever and however you can pray. This passion isn't easy. It's hard to watch Jesus crawl up onto that cross. It's hard to watch him being lifted up to suffocate and to die there. In the end though, we do have to watch. Because he is being crucified all around us even now. He is being starved, scourged, beaten, murdered, racked with disease and neglect, in every crook and cranny of this planet even until this very moment. We do have to watch, and we have to care; and if we are to survive it, to have any chance of making sense of it, we better have someone there with whom to share the watching.

Of course we don't have to stop there. Everyone is able to ask, and find an answer to, the last question my friend Greg asked. "What about that scene at the end of the movie where he just starts to walk out of the tomb? What happens after that? What did everyone do then?"