

On the Corner

Blame, guilt and responsibility

by Robert Docter –

So who's really to blame?

That seems to be one of the major questions surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Who should be held responsible for the crucifixion and death of one who harmed none and willingly enriched all?

I suppose a case could be made that God deserves the blame. Wasn't his prophecy fulfilled, after all, as Jesus became the "Passover Lamb" that now allows the angel of death to "pass-over" our houses if we have accepted Christ as that Lamb of God—just as that angel passed over the houses of the children of Israel if the blood of a sacrificed lamb was sprinkled on their door post.

Maybe the fall guy should be the Romans. We could blame them. Weren't they the guys who were most vicious, the most cruel—but then, who, actually, would we blame?

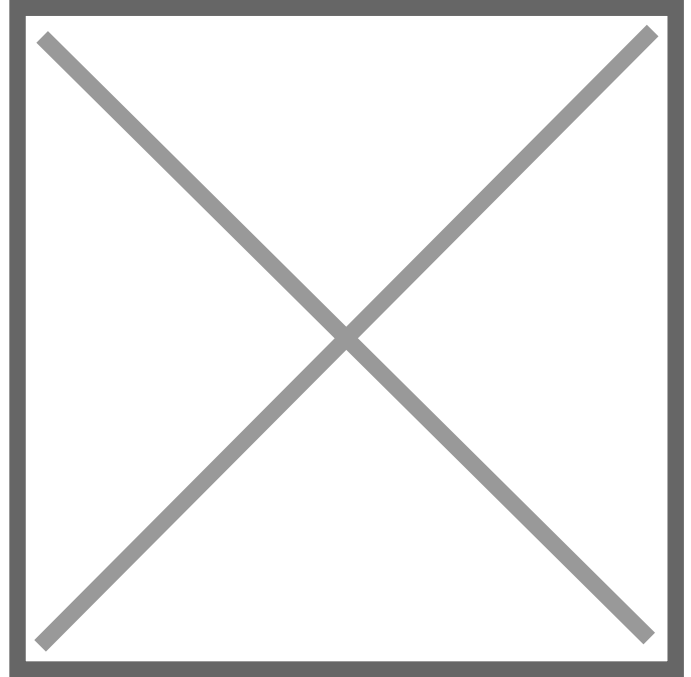
Some Jews believe he intended to point a finger at the Jewish nation of that day. Gibson has had to spend considerable time trying to make sure people know he's not blaming Jews. For then who, actually, would we blame?

Yeah! Who?

I'm not one for playing the blame game, anyway. We seem to need it when we seek to escape our own responsibility in a given action. "Don't blame me—I didn't do it." "It's not my fault!" "There's no way any of this should be placed at my feet." Sometimes, we all go out looking for a scapegoat.

I think blamers have a serious guilt problem; they're ducking responsibility.

Guilt—that's an interesting word. It seems to be a rather pervasive feeling one has that they have wronged someone. If they are aware of how the wrong occurred and who was hurt by it—it's kind of a real guilt that requires amends—confession—possibly—restitution and, hopefully, forgiveness.



Then there's this business of neurotic guilt where we imagine that we have harmed someone because we have violated some parental or cultural rule or injunction. We can't figure out why we feel guilty. We'd like some form of punishment for the behavior, but we don't know how, where, or from whom to get it. I suspect we have some deeply buried hostility toward someone powerful that we're afraid to address.

As if two kinds of guilt weren't enough, psychiatrist Irving Yalom identifies a third kind. He calls it existential guilt and suggests that we feel guilty because we have "failed to fulfill our authentic possibility."

This idea of existential guilt definitely has some spiritual overtones, and theologians from Augustine to Soren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich have identified it. It's actually a very healthy guilt. It keeps us moving toward what we can be, rather than limiting ourselves to what we believe someone else wanted us to be. That distant, sometimes almost unknown, thing we call possibility always seems to be in front of us, no matter how hard we seek to actualize the potential within us. Even as we develop, it just keeps slipping further away. I guess it's true. We can never fully make its tantalizing reality our own, but we can approach it. Our conscience keeps us confronting the guilt and anxiety of our own inauthenticity. It keeps us trying to find, as Augustine said, the "...one within me who is more myself than my self."

So, the "blame-game" doesn't work. It fosters irresponsibility, and, inside, the blamer admits his or her fear and loneliness. The lonely blamer does not enjoy himself—does not find pleasure in her own company. It is an unpleasant place to be to recognize one's self with contempt.

In this Easter season where we contemplate the death and resurrection of Jesus, whom I choose to identify as "the Christ," let us discover the way this man achieved his maximum potential—the fullness of the possibility within him—and the integrity of a complete life. He did it by using every facet of his existence.

The blame for his death belongs to no one. It was and is, simply God's remarkable gift. Moreover, it is, possibly, the supreme act of ingratitude to blame any one, any group, any culture for an act of sacrificial love whereby one perfect man bore the unimaginable pain of his humanity to his death on a cross so that we, with him, may achieve the fulfillment of his resurrection and reconciliation with God.