

Solange De Santis

Anglican Journal, December 2003

Gospel of John a well-crafted, compelling film

By Solange De Santis

Before viewing *The Gospel of John*, I don't think I could have been convinced that the world needed yet another Bible movie, much less a three-hour epic based word-for-word on the text of the fourth gospel.

However, Toronto-based Visual Bible International has crafted a beautiful and compelling film that has a remarkable off-screen as well as on-screen story.

What shows up on the screen is a \$20 million, privately-produced film that takes a unique approach to one of the most familiar stories in the world – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Screenwriter John Goldsmith had a tough job – use the text of the fourth gospel and do not deviate from it – that essentially came down to decisions about what to narrate and what to film. Director Philip Saville, given a budget that allowed for meticulously-researched costumers and music, keeps the action moving and the images visually interesting, even during stretches of pure narration.

Narrator Christopher Plummer's majestic, yet intimate and warm, tones act as a powerful draw, along with the attractive performance of young British actor Henry Ian Cusick as Jesus. This is a physically vigorous Jesus whose drive to clear the temple of money changers is both thrilling and frightening in its intensity. He is a man who is utterly clear about his mission and uses the repetition of this gospel – "I am telling you the truth!" – to make his point to his many groups of listeners, both believers and enemies.

The filmmakers also had to contend with the fact that John is the gospel most preoccupied with proving Christ's divinity. There is no nativity scene in this gospel, which opens with the familiar "In the beginning was the Word" passage. It is also the gospel most often cited as fanning the flames of anti-Semitism, since it points to the "Jewish authorities" in this translation, ("the Jews" in others) as the persecutors of Jesus.

The film opens with a disclaimer that crucifixion was "not sanctioned by Jewish law," but the "Jewish authorities" are a pretty sinister, black-bearded, beetle-browed crowd and at least one Jewish entertainment columnist (Martin Knelman in the *Toronto Star*) has said he was "deeply offended." For his part, Mr. Drabinsky, who is Jewish, said after a screening that "there are elements of the picture that are anti-Judaic, but it isn't an anti-Semitic motion picture."

The text – and the film – also clearly position Jesus as a troublemaker of the most profound kind, one who is proclaiming a completely new vision of heaven and earth and who challenges the status quo personified by the religious hierarchy. He gets under people's skin. "You have no love for God in your hearts," he publicly tells the high priests. Who wouldn't want to get rid of such an audacious challenger?

Although, overall, the production is stunning, the reviews have been good to middling and the length of the film is daunting. It remains to be seen whether it will attract those who are not already interested in its message.

*

*

*

Solange De Santis

Visual Bible, a small company that moved to Toronto from Nashville in 2002 and is listed on the NASDAQ over-the-counter market in the U.S., holds the rights to film the Good News and Contemporary English versions of the Bible, under licence with the American Bible Society. It raised the funds to make *The Gospel of John* through a private offering, according to Alexandra Panousis, vice president of consumer marketing. Visual Bible sought out a remarkable partner – impresario Garth Drabinsky, formerly the head of the Cineplex Odeon cinema chain and the Livent theatrical production company. Mr. Drabinsky, now a self-employed producer, is under investigation in Canada and the U.S. on fraud charges in connection with his time at Livent – charges he disputes. However, he still has a remarkable range of contacts in the worlds of film and theater and was instrumental in securing Mr. Plummer as narrator. Mr. Drabinsky's influence also got the film a berth at the Toronto International Film Festival, in an attempt to position the film as a mainstream movie. Visual Bible has a lot riding on this film. According to its filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, it had about \$322,000 in cash and a working capital deficit of \$12.5 million as of June 30, 2003. A legal dispute with the International Bible Society has prevented Visual Bible from selling its videos of the books of Matthew and Acts, bringing sales for the quarter ended June 30 to \$10,000 compared to \$151,000 in the second quarter of 2002. As of Nov. 11, the stock last traded at \$1.75 US, unchanged, on the NASDAQ over-the-counter market. The film is opening gradually in the U.S. and Canada, with a DVD to be made available at a retail price of about \$50.

For reproduction rights, contact me at:

Solange De Santis
318 McNabb Crescent
Milton, Ontario L9T 3G2
Canada

Phone 905-878-5548
Fax 905-878-2373

solange@solangedesantis.com