

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

Cady's Cross and the Cross of Christ

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The skies are menacing and turbulent as a man walks onto the public stage after years of seclusion and anonymity. Thunder rumbles ominously in the distance. Without looking to right or left he moves purposefully toward the fulfillment of his task. Judgement is in the air.

Who is this man, and where are we? Could this be Moses in Egypt, or Elijah on Mount Carmel? Are we with Jeremiah as he addresses a stiff-necked and hardhearted people, or perhaps by Jordan's banks, observing the One whose presence so often provoked signs in the heavens above and in the earth below?

We might, in Karl Barth's memorable phrase, be entering "the strange, new world within the Bible." But we are not. Rather, we are in the opening scenes of Martin Scorsese's latest film, *Cape Fear*, witnessing the central character, Max Cady (Robert De Niro), leave prison and set out on his violent and vengeful way. Here there is no Word from the Lord in evidence, only twisted versions of biblical truths and the guilty fear of God's creatures.

But this, too, is a strange world. It is a place of ambiguity, dislocation, despair, the world of the contemporary imagination, of our collective dreams and nightmares. In sort, it is our world, where we, the congregation, live and move and have our being. It is a world that the sermon too rarely enters.

The congregation - that body of people who, at the same time, both represent the world and are called out of it - often strikes me as being the forgotten factor in much preaching. Ministers have their own agendas. These may include a close and serious study of scripture, a call to mission in the surrounding society, a cry for greater involvement in church activities. These are all good things. But somehow or other they stay within the confines of organized religion. The world is not present in all its confusion, wilfulness, and pain. The congregation is not engaged.

All sorts of Protestant principles may have contributed to this situation. But it's no use turning to Karl Barth for support here. The author of that marvelous essay on "The Strange, New World Within the Bible" certainly believed in the centrality of the Word of God, and opposed any attempt to establish independent human resources of revelation. But he also felt deeply the realities and tensions of human existence: "as a minister I wanted to speak to the people in the infinite contradiction of their life, but to speak the no less infinite message of the Bible, which was as much of a riddle as life. Often enough these two magnitudes, life and the Bible, have risen before me... like Scylla and Charibdis" (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 100). Here is the preacher's problem, says Barth. On the one hand lies the Bible "full of mystery," and on the other, the congregation, "also full of mystery - and what indeed is more so? What now? asks the minister" (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 104). What? indeed!

I certainly would not attempt to answer that question. Perhaps God alone can answer it, as the Holy Spirit moves in the lives of preacher and congregation alike, creating something new out of the impossible collision between the Word and the world.

But it seems to me that many preachers never get to the "what now?" stage. They

seem to have forgotten about the temptations, the pressures, the compromises, the powerlessness, the futility of secular existence. Because of their ministerial agenda they appear as people confined to a religious, churchly sphere, untouched by the tumultuous forces coursing through the congregation. Whatever good news they may have is not addressed to anyone with dirty hands.

We are not talking here about a lack of homiletical technique. It is not simply a matter of employing contemporary illustrations or allusions to films and television programmes. It's a question of identity, solidarity, perception, theology: is the preacher part of the world that stands so much in need of the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ? Does the preacher sense the pulse that is beating in the heart of the culture of which he or she is a part? Is there the least recognition of the scandal that the world poses for faith, and faith for the world? How central to the sermon is the cross?

The cross is an ever-present symbol in *Cape Fear*. Almost the first thing we see in the film is Max Cady's bare torso as he gets ready to leave prison after a fourteen-year sentence for rape. Tattooed on his body, together with numerous judgmental verses from the Bible - "Vengeance is Mine, I will Repay" - is a large cross. From one arm of it hangs the word TRUTH, from the other, JUSTICE. The image serves as a grotesque reminder throughout the film that the director, Martin Scorsese, has concerns beyond the fast-moving plot. But what exactly is he trying to say?

Scorsese is one of the most provocative and influential contemporary filmmakers, who certainly knows a thing or two about the spirit of the age. He has helped to shape it. The director of *Raging Bull*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, he consistently raises moral and theological questions in his work.

Cape Fear could have been an ordinary thriller, a straightforward remake of the 1960's original that had little or no religious content. But in his hands it has become, as he puts it, "Catholicised" (*London Independent*, 22 Dec. 1991) and turned into an exploration of guilt and punishment.

At one level, Max Cady can be seen as Scorsese's revenge on all the vociferous opponents of *The Last Temptation*. Religion is burned into Cady's warped mind in the same way that Bible texts are imprinted on his skin. In moments of great savagery and violence he speaks in tongues; before raping a woman he asks her if she is "ready to be born again?" This, one is entitled to think, is Scorsese expressing his contempt for fundamentalism. If so it is a pretty low way of doing it.

But there is more to the film than that. It made me reflect on two issues - the meaning of justice in human life, and our contemporary obsession with images of violence and degradation. Both are intimately connected with that cross.

An air of uncertainty actually surrounds Cady himself. He may be a religious nut, but is he also something else, an avenging angel, perhaps? When the thunder rolls, does it proclaim Cady as the object or the instrument of wrath? Who is being judged - Cady or his victims, each of whom harbours guilty secrets?

Sam Bowden (played by Nick Nolte), the main target of Cady's vengeful spirit, was Cady's defense lawyer at the trial fourteen years previously. Knowing that his client was guilty of rape he suppressed a piece of evidence that would have led to his acquittal. He set aside the demands of the legal system in the name of a higher law, and Cady was put away. Was that justice? The judge and the prosecutors were only doing their jobs, Cady points out: Sam Bowden didn't do his.

We are on Bowden's side here, to some extent. Prison seems too good a place for a demonic figure like Max Cady. But Cady brings uncomfortable truths to the surface.

Bowden is not only guilty of breaking the law and serious professional misconduct, he's cheating on his wife and has been for years. What gives him the right to sit in judgement on anyone? "I'm going to teach you the meaning of commitment," threatens Cady.

Neither is Bowden's family portrayed as innocent victims of Cady's violence. Scorsese hated the original version of *Cape Fear* because he thought "the family was too cliched, too happy.... They were like Martians to me. I was rooting for Max to get them" (*Independent*). The 90's Bowdens are clearly more to Scorsese's liking. The wife (Jessica Lange) is bitter and resentful towards her husband. In the middle of the night after she and Sam have made love we see her adorning her face with make-up. She guiltily wipes it away when he is disturbed from sleep. Who is she longing to be with?

Their adolescent daughter, Danielle (Juliette Lewis), expelled from her previous school for smoking pot, and aware of her parents threadbare relationship, is unhappy and disturbed. A knowing girl who feigns innocence, she brings calamity upon the household by her liaison with Cady.

What does justice mean in this world, the justice that is weighed in the balance of Cady's cross? It means annihilation, holocaust, a guilty verdict upon us all. For who can stand when the secrets of the human heart are revealed? In biblical terms, strict justice means the Flood. Scorsese knows this. The final, cataclysmic struggles of the film take place in a raging torrent. The Bowdens prevail against Cady, who disappears in a ferment of water and glossolalia. But there is no triumph in their victory. They, too, have been consumed.

There is no rainbow in *Cape Fear*. The grace of God declared in the Noachic covenant, which allows us to make judgements, to enact justice of a kind in this dispensation, is entirely absent. The cross can only be what it originally was - a monstrous symbol of violent death. Between TRUTH and JUSTICE there is no MERCY.

Scorsese's angry moralism leads directly to the abyss. The universal presence of guilt which he proclaims produces a form of nihilism in which violence plays a central part. The graphic nature of the violence in *Cape Fear* is quite staggering. During the rape of Sam Bowden's girlfriend, Cady is shown biting a chunk of flesh out of her face and spitting it on the floor. But in this respect the film is unremarkable. Day in, day out, week in, week out, year in, year out, millions of people are watching films like this which routinely display horrific acts of violence against the human person.

These scenes are present for a reason. It is not simply that they frighten, excite, or titillate the audience. For director and moviegoer alike they comprise a credal statement. They affirm the belief that it will all end this way, that this is all that it means. Beyond the psychopaths, the jilted lovers, the arbitrary killers who inhabit the world of the motion picture, it is life itself that we fear and wish to see destroyed. For here there is no mercy.

Going to the movies often leaves a very nasty taste in a Christian's mouth. But at the very least it can serve to remind us that "we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). Violence is a spiritual, not a moral issue. It is intimately bound up with our human rejection of God's mercy and grace. For the preacher, *Cape Fear* is the world crying out for the cross of Christ. What now?