Name-dropping: Hebrews 5:5-10

It is not pain and violence that God desires, says the preacher of Hebrews. It is human life as God created it to be, summoned it to be.

by Thomas G. Long in the March 21, 2006 issue

In 2005, just in time for Easter, Mel Gibson released an edited version of his controversial film *The Passion of the Christ*. A few brutal scenes had been cut and camera angles had been changed, all in an attempt to soften the graphic violence of the original. Gibson said that the new edition of the film would appeal to people who "want to take your Aunt Martha or Uncle Harry" to see it but who would find the first version too intense.

I suspect that what prompted this tamer version of the movie was not merely the squeamishness of Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry but the fact that the original film had stirred up a surprising and unintended reaction: it caused some people to question the very goodness of God. One woman who saw the film said, "I left the theater feeling sick. What sort of God would let that kind of violence happen to his own son? I guess I was supposed to be moved by the sacrifice of Jesus; instead I was repulsed by the idea of a God who would *will* such a thing."

This is not a new response to Jesus' death, of course. The cord running through Western theology, from Ambrose to Anselm and beyond, that only the violent sacrifice of a perfect and sinless Jesus could appease a God whose honor has been affronted and whose anger has been aroused is, as Michael Welker says, "nothing less than destructive of faith." It has, Welker continues, "propagated a latent image of God that is deeply unchristian, indeed demonic: This God is always seeking compensation."

Gibson's movie, however, exposed the pastoral side of this problem. The idea of a God who always seeks compensation, a God who always wants a pound of flesh, is not simply a tactical problem in a chess game among professional theologians; it

provokes a crisis of trust among the ordinary faithful too. We may say in sermon and liturgy that the death of Jesus squared the debt once and for all, but we are still left with the troubling picture of a God who balanced the checkbook by inflicting pain. Who would love or wish to draw nigh to such a God? We suspect that a God who requires compensation just might encrypt a cancer cell into our tissue in order to teach us an ethical lesson or send a surging tsunami to pummel a coastline for the sake of some cosmic moral equation.

The pastor who preached the sermon we call the Letter to the Hebrews felt the same tremor of terror in his own congregation. Worship had become for them “a blazing fire and darkness and gloom” (Heb. 12:18). People were staying away from services. They had drooping hands and weak knees from the heavy burdens of their religion. The problem? At the center of their faith was a God always seeking compensation, a God seemingly incapable of satisfaction. Like ancient priests, these Christians trudged dutifully into the sanctuary bearing offerings. Week after week, year after year, they brought what they could, but without refreshment. “God, what do you want? A cereal offering, a bull, a ram? Do you want a tithe, a testimony, a guilty conscience? Do you want me to serve on four committees and run the night shelter? Do you want prayer without ceasing or a thousand signed petitions for peace and justice?”

No, God wants only one thing, said the preacher of Hebrews. Not an unblemished goat or a fat pledge card, not a gift to the building fund or a promise to walk across burning coals. God desires this: a fully human life, a life well lived. “The glory of God,” said Irenaeus, “is humanity full alive.” But, of course, a life truly well lived is the one thing we cannot, on our own, bring to God. So it was our brother Jesus who walked the same paths as we, experienced the same temptations as we, endured the same afflictions common to our humanity, but who never lost his bearings, never compromised his humanity. It was he who walked, as the high priest, into the great sanctuary and, on behalf of us all, placed himself into the offering plate, the one thing God truly desires: a human being fully alive.

It was not pain and violence that God desired. It was human life as God created it to be, summoned it to be. The pain and the violence were already out there on the path; they had been there since the blood of Abel soaked the earth and cried out for vengeance. No one can walk this human path in faith and obedience without encountering suffering. In the midst of that suffering Jesus cried out with tears, not for revenge and not in hate, but “with prayers and supplications . . . to the one who

was able to save.” The human being each of us fails to be, he was, and he is “not ashamed” to call us his brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:11).

At the end of *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker says, “The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it . . . to the life force.” In Christian language, to be truly human is to shape our lives into an offering to God. But we are lost children who have wandered away from home, forgotten what a truly human life might be. When Jesus, our older brother, presented himself in the sanctuary of God, his humanity fully intact, he did not cower as though he were in a place of “blazing fire and darkness and gloom.” Instead he called out, “I’m home, and I have the children with me” (Heb. 2:13).