



Jim Caviezel (Luke) and James Faulkner (Paul) in *Paul, Apostle of Christ*, written and directed by Andrew Hyatt

APOSTLE OF LOVE

Paul, Apostle of Christ opens with the saint as an old man, imprisoned in Rome by the Emperor Nero...

By Gerard Condon

FOR SOMEONE with so much influence on the history of Christianity, St Paul is remarkably absent from the movies. He does feature as a rather anodyne figure in the 1951 epic *Quo Vadis*; and there was a cheesy Italian miniseries (*Paul of Tarsus*) dedicated to the saint in 2000. This new film from Sony Pictures has far better production qualities and aims for a historically accurate portrayal of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

The reason for St Paul's low profile in the public imagination may be that he is not mentioned in the Gospels. Paul's role in the Christian story began *after* the Resurrection. A leading Jewish Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, he had a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, after a blinding vision of the risen Jesus. In Christ he came to be "known and loved by God," in a new way, one that released him from the heavy burdens of the Jewish Law.

St Paul saw the Good News as directed to all the nations. Despite the initial opposition of St Peter, he quickly broadened the horizons of the fledgling Christian community beyond Israel. Using the extensive road and shipping routes of the Roman Empire, it is said that he travelled some 20,000 kilometers on his missionary endeavors, establishing Christian communities all over the eastern Mediterranean. He became known as "Paul," the Greco-Latin version of his name, rather than the Hebrew "Saul."

Nothing more?

Paul, Apostle of Christ opens with the saint (played by James Faulkner) as an old man, imprisoned in Rome by the Emperor Nero. Grizzly and haggard, he resembles Shakespeare's King Lear as he peers through the bars of his cell and whispers, "Is there nothing more?" The city and its decadent ruler have made life nasty, brut-

ish and short. In 64AD a fire had destroyed much of the city. In a fit of spite, the Emperor had blamed the disaster on the new Christian "sect".

Luke (Jim Caviezel), the author of the third Gospel, comes to visit his erstwhile teacher. They had been companions on some of Paul's missionary journeys. Conscious that the Apostles, like Paul, are now elderly, Luke is anxious to record their memoirs for posterity. He finds lodging with the family of Aquila (John Lynch) and his wife Priscilla (Joanne Whalley), and uses his skills as a physician to assist those injured in Nero's persecution. The church in Rome was "at a crossroads," not sure whether "to continue to live in faith," thereby risking the lives of everyone, or to escape to the relative safety of Ephesus or any of the Greek cities where Christianity was better tolerated.

Pitiable state

Luke is secreted to Paul's cell under the cover of darkness. He finds him in a pitiable state, but as cantankerous as ever, and humors him with fresh robes and ointment for his wounds. Soon enough, Luke's pres-

Jim Caviezel with director Andrew Hyatt, who also directed *Full of Grace*, a movie on the life of Mary

ence is detected and he is brought before the jailer, Marius Gallas (Oliver Martinez) a war-weary commander whose appointment to the jail had been a demotion. His daughter is ill and, realizing that Luke is a physician, allows him to continue visiting Paul in the hope that he might also cure the child. The jailer's wife, Irenica (Antonia Campbell-Hughes), on the other hand, blames their child's illness on her husband's association with the Christians.

Paul and Luke's main concern is to deliver a coherent and accurate account of the essence of the Christian faith. This task becomes more urgent when retaliation and revenge emerges as an option among the younger male members of the underground Church. Cassius (Alessandro Sperduti) argues that the Christians of Rome should strike back and impose the justice of God on their enemies. Paul insists that the Christian message is one of forbearance and forgiveness: "We cannot repay evil with evil. Evil can only be overcome with good."

Luke also begins his account of the early Church, a work that would become the *Acts of the Apostles*. Some of the best cinematic moments of the movie are flashbacks to the life of the younger Paul (played by Yorgos Karamihos), including his background in



the Jewish faith, his role in the martyrdom of St Stephen, and his conversion experience.

Written tradition

This movie is sympathetic to the language and content of the New Testament. Like no other film up to now, it portrays the transition from the oral tradition of the apostles to the written words of the New Testament. Viewers who are familiar with the writings of St Paul will enjoy listening to their favourite quotations from the New Testament. Mine was the actor's use of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, on the qualities of love; and his reference to life being poured away like a libation (2 Timothy 4:3-8). Scripture scholars will appreciate how the movie accurately portrays the social context of the early Church, and the limited, superstitious nature of the pagan religions it would replace.

Paul, Apostle of Christ was written and directed by Andrew Hyatt. He previously directed *Full of Grace* (2015) a movie about the last days of Mary. Each of the cast members gives a committed performance in convincing costumes, and makes good use of the intelligent script. Of note to Christian audiences is Jim Caviezel, a devout Catholic, who previously portrayed Jesus in Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). James Faulkner, as Paul, conveys the strong willed character of the person we are familiar with from his writings in the New Testament.

On the downside, too much of the movie is taken up with the story

of persecution. There is little enough of Paul himself, certainly not as much as the title suggests. The movie feels longer than its 108-minute runtime; it is dimly lit and dialogue driven. Caviezel's efforts to lighten the mood with dashes of sarcasm largely fall flat. For dramatic effect, I would like to have seen something more of the vainglory of imperial Rome, and the folly of its decadent Emperor. But this is not a sword-and-sandal epic. It was filmed over the single month of September 2017, with a relatively small production budget of \$5 million, in a disused fortification in Malta.

Age of martyrs

The movie closes with the martyrdom of Paul; though we are spared its gory details in this PG-13 rated film. The credits remind the viewer that Christians around the world are still persecuted because of their beliefs. In countries like Syria that persecution has been no less traumatic than it was in first century Rome.

As Western societies become more secularised, it is likely that Christians will again find themselves on the margins of society and in conflict with an alien culture. Our gut reaction may be to withdraw to a safe haven or adopt a retaliatory stance. The popular *God's not Dead* series of movies are tinged with such a negative reaction to Western society. This movie, however, encouraged me to bear patiently with all forms of hostility. Our duty is never to strike back; or as the character of St Paul puts it in this movie, "Love is the only way." ♦