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'Machine Gun Preacher': What would Jesus do?

by Sr. Rose Pacatte



In "Machine Gun Preacher," Gerard Butler stars as Sam Childers, a former drug dealer who turned his life around to save orphaned children in East Africa. (Photo: Relativity)

As I watched director Marc Forster's new film, based on a true story, memories of other movies about men of faith caught in extreme moral dilemmas made my memory, moral imagination and conscience collide. It also evoked contemporary documentaries and feature films about Sudan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and other countries in conflict where kidnapped children become soldiers.

"Machine Gun Preacher" is the story of reformed alcoholic, drug addict and felon, Sam Childers (born 1962), who has lived as a Christian mercenary-like fighter in conflict areas of Africa since 1998. This is a powerful, raw experience of a preacher who is comfortable saying, "I am a soldier for Christ."

After his conversion to Christ, his mission went from building huts in northern Uganda and an orphanage in a defenseless location in South Sudan, to using a machine gun to rescue children. Although the film shows him killing a child in self-defense, in an interview he told me: "I can tell you definitively that I have never killed a child -- even though it could be justified to defend yourself from a child soldier."

I didn't know if I was being preached at or propagandized by the film. Interviewing Childers didn't help a lot either. He said the film was the story of a wild kid gone bad who found Jesus, that anyone can change the direction of his or her life. This may be true, but the ending of the film is not an altar call but an implicit call to arms and an explicit dare to not challenge the means he uses to rescue children.

After the movie all I could think of were the questions of conscience that confronted the fictional Jesuits in "The Mission," and real-life Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero when they were faced with unspeakable crimes against humanity. I think a review of the dilemmas these good men faced is critical to evaluating "Machine Gun Preacher."

In Forster's relatively brief directorial career he has given us vastly different films, including "Monster's Ball" (2001); "Finding Neverland" (2004), the life of James Matthew Barry, author of Peter Pan; "The Kite Runner" (2007); and "Quantum of Solace" (2008), a James Bond film. All these films tell stories about men, not women, in conflict with their conscience, each other and the world.

Now in "Machine Gun Preacher," the audience is carried along by Sam's story right up until he faces a decision that seems to conflict with his Christian beliefs about peace over violence. And we are challenged to side with Sam when he makes the decision to fight guns with guns, violence with violence in the war for the soul of Sudan and its children -- something that no one else seems to know or care about.

Childers' dilemma

It is 1992. Sam (Gerard Butler), just out of prison, experiences a conversion after almost killing a man while high and drunk. He starts his own construction business and moves his wife, who is a former stripper (Michelle Monaghan), and daughter (Madeline Carroll) out of the trailer park and into a nice home. He builds his own church where everyone is welcome. He follows the call of a visiting preacher to visit northern Uganda and help with mission construction projects. He takes a side trip to southern Sudan, and witnesses atrocities perpetrated by Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army.

Kony, a former altar boy, claims to want to establish a theocracy and uses religion to justify his brutal reign in Uganda, Congo and Sudan. Sam becomes aware of the children the Lord's Army has abducted and turned into soldiers. He vows to build a home for these children and the refugees in their own country.

One night, out in a pickup truck with trusted soldiers from the Sudan Liberation Army, he discovers children in the bush. They manage to take half of the children to the orphanage and vow to return for the others. When Sam gets back, the children have been thrown into a pile and burned.

Sam, always comfortable around guns and firearms, builds a secure orphanage. However, he goes on the attack when the Lord's Army is in the area because he believes this is what God has told him to do. In a land ruled by the whims of a self-anointed religious guerrilla warlord, in a part of Sudan without formal law, infrastructure or local government, without recourse to any international help, attacking and defending become synonymous for Childers. He feels that his faith and his need and ability to protect

others justify his violence.



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Is "Machine Gun Preacher" a Christian film? Certainly it is not a clear "message" film in the same vein that "Fireproof" (2008) was, or the films that come from the Sherwood Baptist Church ministry, Sherwood Pictures, for example. And these are fine, if you are looking for Sunday school at the movies for white males in suburban America.

Instead the message of "Machine Gun Preacher" is a challenge from the born-again Christian Sam Childers, the real Childers, arrayed in fatigues and looking like a rogue guerrilla fighter, when he asks: "If someone took your son or daughter, and you asked me to find them, would you question the way I would do it?"

My question for the director: Why not just tell the story and trust the audience to figure things out? Why push back at the audience in defensive mode before the credits roll, unless you have an agenda?

Kony and South Sudan

Kony was indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in the Hague but insists he has done nothing wrong. Said to have forced 30,000 children into his army, he once told Reuters, "We don't have any children. We only have combatants." In 2008, the U.S. Treasury placed Kony on the list of "Specially Designated Terrorists" so that any assets might be confiscated. In May 2010, President Obama signed into law "The Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act," aimed at forcing an end to Kony's army.

In March 2010, it was reported that Kony had joined Sudanese government-backed militias in Darfur. Childers told me that so far this year Kony has abducted more than 1,000 people and killed at least 200.

In 2005 the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the north and south of Sudan. The Republic of South Sudan came into being July 9 as an independent nation. However, President Omar al-Bashir of (north) Sudan has promised that within six months the country will fail. A month after independence, terrorism is on the rise in South Sudan, including guerrilla militias and the Lord's Resistance Army, as well as bombing raids. According to Childers, the planes are Russian-made and many of the pilots are Russian.



In our interview Childers wanted to emphasize that there are many ways to save a child. He recounted a story where he counseled a woman in his U.S. church against having an abortion. "And what if I do have the child?" she asked.

"I will give you \$5,000 for that child," he said.

He talked about finding children scattered in the brush after an attack by the Lord's Resistance Army and bringing them to the orphanage, and reuniting families when possible. "It's not all about violence," he said. "The government of South Sudan does not need me now, but if things get bad again, I will help." Currently, he is rescuing children in neighboring African countries.

John Prendergast, a Catholic peace and human rights activist, author and cofounder of the Enough Project to end genocide and crimes against humanity, appeared on "The Colbert Report" July 18 to talk about the new South Sudan. Prendergast has proposed a combination approach for the two Sudans that includes the use of anti-aircraft weapons to protect the new country from bombings ordered by Bashir's government.

Matt Brown, associate director of communication for Enough Project, who has seen the film, told me that Childers "presents a compelling argument."

"But," he continued, "there are rules and laws, and as a private citizen you cannot go into another country and start hunting down ruthless evil people independently on the instructions of God. This should be done in a legitimate way by legitimate armies. Childers' way is sensationalist and propagandist, not an ideology we believe in, though the end goal is the same. Enough Project has different ideas on how to achieve that."

Gretchen Steidle Wallace, the founder of Global Grassroots -- Conscious Social Change for Women, was the producer of the Emmy-nominated film "The Devil Came on Horseback," about the genocide in Darfur. Her organization works with women in Rwanda, and soon in northern Uganda, who were abducted as children, raped, forced into soldiering and now are returning home as young adults with children. She has said that the only way to assure change in the Sudans is regime change.

Wallace's brother, Brian Steidle, told me that the fight in Sudan is over oil. "How do you resolve the fight over oil? With an outside governing body -- not the African Union or the U.N. -- that controls and monitors the oil to make sure that the Earth is shared by all. They have to share the oil."

The real Sam Childers

Today Childers and his wife, Lynn, lead a congregation in Pennsylvania and run a mission in South Sudan. In my interview with him, Childers went to great pains to explain that the film is based on his 2009 memoir, *Another Man's War: The Story of One Man's Battle to Save Children in the Sudan*. In the book he expresses disdain for diplomatic talks and negotiations as people are dying.

Much has changed since, he said, including his "Rambo" style tactics. In the last two years, no one has been killed at his mission and environs. He assured me that a new documentary coming out in January will flesh out the Hollywood version of his life and mission.

However, genocide continues in the Nuba Mountains and Abyei Province. Childers believes, with many others, that the only way peace will go forward is for regime change in Khartoum. "But the problem," he maintains, "is that we [in the West] are afraid to say this because we are afraid of Bashir; he's powerful. He needs to be taken out of office by his own people and I hope it happens soon. He's murdered a lot of people and he needs to stand trial for it. He laughed at the charges made against him by the International Criminal Court.

"People make me out as a mercenary; I wish that were true because I live off my preaching. I do not trade in arms; that is absolutely false. What I want is justice for people who are getting murdered. Not vengeance, but justice. My intention is to rescue children, but I'd like to get my hands on Bashir."

There were two things that Childers emphasizes strongly: the amazing and persevering work of Catholic Relief Services, and that the U.S. government must stop selling surplus military weapons to Arab countries. Such sales fuel the continuing wars and conflicts, which lead to the abduction of children for soldiers.

Childers believes he is a freedom fighter, not to force people to believe in Christ, but to achieve freedom so people can choose who and what to believe. According to Childers: "When you stand for freedom, you promote Christ. ? And like John Graham said, 'Pray for peace but keep your gun cocked.' " (Graham is a former U.S. foreign service member and author of the public policy blog "On The Edge.")

Childers feels his military mission to rescue children is Bible-based and therefore unassailable. "I am a soldier for Christ."

"An actual military soldier?" I pressed him.

"I am not going to say I am not. I am a soldier, whether self-proclaimed or whatever. I do not believe in murder, I believe in self-defense, I believe in peace most of all. Matthew 5: Blessed are the peacemakers."

You will have to decide if Childers' Christianity in action reflects the Beatitudes; if his way is ethical or moral. It certainly is for him; indeed, to him it seems the only way in the absence of on-the-ground efforts to protect people from genocide, abduction, rape and murder. It is true that the story of what happened and is happening in South Sudan and elsewhere in Africa and the world is heartbreaking, especially as told through a former boy soldier in the film, but "Machine Gun Preacher" felt like a propaganda film.

"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other," Mother Teresa once said. She never mentioned machine guns.

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