

"TENDER MERCIES"

Robert Duvall's 1983 film is, in effect, a sermonic followup to his "The Apostle." Both convey high appreciation for lower-middle-class American evangelical Protestantism.

A COMMENTARY following our church's 4.27.01 discussion of this film classic.

THE STORY: **Rosalie** married at 16, was a Vietnam widow with son at 18; supports self & child by running an automotive service station. **Mack** drifts in looking for work-for-food, & she obliges. Formerly a famous country-music songsmith, he hit the bottle & lost everything (career, singer-wife Dixie, daughter): the film's first words (of Mack, drunk in a motel cabin connected with the service station): "Give me the bottle!" R. & M. marry. She takes him & her son to the country Baptist church where she sings in the choir, & (after a considerable interval of weeks) M. & the son are immersed. M. tries to see his daughter, but Dixie (with the only instance of blasphemy in the film, "Jesus Christ!") refuses--but the daughter discovers where her father is, & goes to him: reconciliation. The daughter dies in the crash of a car driven by her drunk husband (reminding M. of the girl who died in a crash when he was the drunk driver). M. bonds with R.'s son, with whom in the last scene he's playing football-catch. A quartet of country singers manage to persuade M. to return to songwriting & performing, which he agrees to because he wants to support his family (having kicked the bottle before his baptism).

1 The **title**? Over against & in spite of the Texas-prairie bleakness of her place, & the tragedy of her young widowhood, Rosalie experiences God as blessing her with "tender mercies," a phrase appearing a dozen times in the King James Version--9x in the Psalms; once each in Proverbs, Luke, & James. Early in the story, we hear her at evening prayer pray accurately Ps.25.4-6 KJV from memory: "Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me...on thee do I wait all the day. Remember, O LORD, thy tender mercies [Heb. *thy bowels*]" Being plural here, the Heb. wd. means "viscera" (seen as focus of feelings) & "compassions, mercies"; in singular, "womb."

2 The **center**? Rosalie's calm faith & healing trust no matter the surrounding chaos & personal tragedy. No stoic, however, she is emotionally engaged in whatever is going on; & no plaster saint, she must struggle to make sense--biblical sense--of the nonsense & antisense that impinge on her life.

3 The **hymns**? Important in "The Apostle," they are (it seems to me) even moreso in "Tender Mercies."

The first time we see our principals in church, everybody (including Mack, from memory) is singing "We have heard the joyful sound, Jesus saves, Jesus saves"! Before that, no sound in this film could be called **joyful**. On Rosalie's face we can read her living her faith, not her fears, so why *not* joy?

Fear? At a later church worship, everybody sings "Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life's tempestuous sea....'Fear not, I will pilot thee'."

4 Anybody **transformed**? Certainly not Dixie, who only screams (when apprised of her 18-year-old daughter's death) "Why has God done this to me?" Not the promoter, whose only interest is getting more songs out of Mack ("Do you still drink?") The son? He settles down as the stepfather/son relationship develops. The daughter? She's beginning to understand & love her father, but her soon death cuts off that process. The countrymusic quartet (three of whom are trying to support their families by gigs) move from gloom to some happiness as Mack joins them with songs new & old. Certainly Mack! Transformed from a drifting drunk to a responsible Christian, caring for his family & beyond (especially his concern for the quartet)....Our group discussed our own transformation of attitude toward the quartet, which at first we saw as a scruffy threat: "Don't believe those first impressions!" It seemed that something awful was about to happen, but it was something wonderful.

5 Duvall, who plays Mack, is himself an accomplished songwriter; & some of the film's songs are compositions of his. During the story, he writes & sings songs with lines like these: "It's hard to face reality." "God can forgive me, why can't you?" Soon after his baptism, "When Jesus went down to be baptized, .. on the wings of a dove." And near film's end, "He [God] gathers up the pieces of my life."

6 Nothing saccharine or polyanna about this film! Gritty realism. But triumph: R. says to husband M., "I love you; when I say my prayers, I thank the Lord for His tender mercies." Working in the garden near film's end, M. asked the Jobean "Why? I don't trust happiness." Of life's untowardnesses, which does God do & which does he only permit--&, again, why?