Readings from the Gospel of Mark dominate year “B” in the Lectionary, which begins this Advent, and present the church with a powerful vision of Christian life. Although we cannot be certain about the circumstances surrounding its composition, it is likely that this Gospel was written in and for a Christian community that had experienced dangerous suffering, probably at Rome under the persecution of Nero, and the tone of the Gospel reflects that community’s struggle for meaning in the midst of its losses. Three major motifs course throughout the Gospel story: the mission of Jesus, his passion and death, and the portrayal of the disciples of Jesus. I will offer some thoughts on each.

The Life-Giving Mission of Jesus

First of all, Mark presents the mission of Jesus as a fundamental struggle between the power of life, which is a gift of God’s Spirit, and the forces of evil and death that are ultimately intent on destroying human life. That struggle is dramatically staged in the opening scenes of the narrative. Jesus of Nazareth comes from Galilee to be baptized by John, and as he rises up out of the waters of the Jordan, he is suffused with God’s Spirit and a “voice from heaven” declares that he is indeed God’s Son, the Beloved (1:10-11). So identified, Jesus, the Spirit-filled Son of God, is thrust by that same Spirit into the desert, the traditional place of testing in the biblical saga, and there wrestles with (and ultimately overcomes) the power of evil (1:12-13).

This dramatic, near-mythic scene sets the tone for the rest of Jesus’ ministry as portrayed by Mark. Jesus, the beloved Son, is so filled with the power of God’s life that he is able to overwhelm even the power of death. In the first several chapters of the Gospel, where Mark narrates the public ministry of Jesus, most of that struggle takes the form of Jesus’ healing ministry. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ healings are nearly all exorcisms, that is, lurking beneath the surface of human pain and suffering is ultimately the power of death itself that the Bible views as an unwanted evil. The first chapter of Mark is a string of Jesus’ healings, beginning with the expulsion of a demon from a man suffering in the synagogue of Capernaum (1:21-28) and climaxing in the cleansing of the leper, a disease

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that in the biblical world signified death itself (1:40-45).

Thus, Mark presents Jesus here and throughout the Gospel as the champion of life, liberating human beings from the grip of death, showing extraordinary compassion through his healing touch, and restoring broken bodies and shattered spirits to their God-given dignity as human beings. The power of life flows out from Jesus, confronting death and restoring life (see, for example, the outpouring of life from Jesus in the story of the woman with the hemorrhage in 5:30).

This vision of Jesus’ mission, which Mark sees as the continuing mission of the disciples of Jesus (see 3:13-19; 6:7-13), still has strong resonance for us as a Christian community today. It is evocative of the “civilization of love” that was a favored theme of the writings of Pope John Paul II, a vision of human life and human society that is to counter a “culture of death” that tramples on human dignity and human rights.

The Death of Jesus as the Summit of His Mission of Life

A second powerful and comprehensive motif in Mark’s Gospel is its focus on the passion of Jesus. Right from the start of the Gospel story, the reader is alerted to the eventual death of Jesus. Jesus’ ministry begins as John the Baptist is arrested (1:14; see also the story of the death of John in 6:17-19). After a string of conflicts early in the mission of Jesus, his opponents conspire to kill him (3:6). And from the midpoint of the Gospel story in Mark, Jesus begins to instruct his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and there face hostility and death (see the passion predictions in 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). Martin Kähler’s often quoted description of Mark’s Gospel as a “passion narrative with a long introduction” is merited.

The key to the meaning of Jesus’ death for Mark can be found in a key text near the end of Jesus’ fateful journey to Jerusalem. As the disciples are about to enter Jericho and begin the ascent to Jerusalem, Jesus instructs his followers: “...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life in ransom for the many” (10:32). The death of Jesus is not a meaningless miscarriage of justice but a profound expression of the ultimate purpose of his mission of life. Jesus dies because of the way he lived—a life poured out in service: healing, confronting evil, and speaking the truth.

The context for this key saying of Jesus drives this point home. As in the earlier passion predictions, Jesus’ words are met with incomprehension on the part of his disciples (see below). In this instance, James and John ask for positions of honor at Jesus’ side. In response, Jesus reminds all the disciples that their use of power and prestige must be in contrast to that of the world: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:42-44).

For Mark’s Gospel the death of Jesus was an act of “diakonia” or service, not service in a debasing, servile way but a genuine act of self-transcendence, an act of love on behalf of the other. When Mark describes Jesus’ death in his passion story, he underscores its radical, complete character. Jesus wordlessly breathes his last, giving his all for the sake of the world (15:37). In that noble act, the centurion at the cross recognizes the presence of the divine: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39).

Thus, for Mark’s Gospel the Cross represents a fundamental human ethic of power...
that is to characterize the community of Jesus and put it in contrast to the accepted norms of society. The Christian is endowed with power, but this is not a power to be used in dominating or oppressing others, but, in the manner of Jesus himself, is to be used to free human beings from the shackles of death and to engender life.

Mark’s Portrayal of the Christian Community

In each of the Gospels, the manner in which the evangelist portrays the disciples and the other characters who respond to Jesus gives us a glimpse of the Gospel’s vision of the Christian community. Modern biblical scholarship has underscored the emphasis Mark’s Gospel seems to give to the weakness and even the failure of the disciples of Jesus within the Gospel story. In the opening chapters, during Jesus’ public ministry, they fail to understand the meaning of his parables (4:13) and are baffled and confused by many of his most dramatic miracles (e.g., 6:51-52). On the road to Jerusalem they fail to comprehend his warnings about his impending death (see the passion predictions cited above). And most abject of all, in the passion story itself, the Markan disciples betray, desert, and deny Jesus.

While this portrayal of the first followers of Jesus is admittedly grim, it is not the whole story. While their weakness is glaring, these same disciples are chosen by Jesus and given a share in his mission (1:16-20). Jesus patiently teaches them and leads them to Jerusalem. And alongside the disciples’ example of obtuseness and human weakness, there are other characters in the gospel who point the way to authentic discipleship. The sick recognize Jesus’ power and seek healing from him. Bartimaeus asks Jesus for the power to see (10:51). A scribe genuinely seeks the truth and is praised by Jesus (12:28-34). A widow gives “all her life” to the Temple and is blessed by Jesus (12:41-44). A woman in Bethany recognizes who Jesus is and that he is on his way to death. She lavishes tender love on him, anointing his body for burial, and, in turn, Jesus praises her (14:3-9). A Roman centurion confesses Jesus as the Son of God at the moment of his death (15:39). Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council that had condemned Jesus, buries Jesus with dignity (15:43). And some women who had come up with him on the journey from Jerusalem stand vigil at the cross and ultimately become the first witnesses to his resurrection (15:40-41; 16:1-8).

These cameo characters demonstrate that the church is a “mixed” community, a human community capable both of abject failure and breathtaking heroism, a community where both betrayal and fidelity coexist.

Perhaps for this reason, Mark has cast the story of Jesus as a “journey,” a time-tested biblical metaphor that has become a powerful symbol of Christian existence. The church is not a finished product, as we know all too well, but a human community still struggling on its way to God. That, in fact, is how Mark’s Gospel ends. The angelic messenger who meets the women at the tomb reminds them of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper—“I will go before you to Galilee and there you will see me” (16:7). The church as portrayed in Mark’s Gospel is entrusted with the mission of giving life but it itself needs healing and reconciliation. Even though weak and failing, the disciples are also entrusted with Jesus’ mission to the world.

In a time when the church has known crushing failures and is uncertain of its future, the Gospel of Mark offers strength and encouragement.