

NEW EDITION

FOREWORDS BY
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THE
Risk
OF THE
Cross

LIVING GOSPEL NONVIOLENCE
IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

Arthur Laffin



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INTRODUCTION TO THE REVISED EDITION

It has been 39 years since I contributed to writing the first edition of *The Risk of the Cross*, a project that evolved out of an earlier work written primarily for Catholics in Connecticut and published as a study guide for church use in 1979. Using central themes of Mark's gospel, *The Risk of the Cross*, which was published two years later, was written with the hope that followers of Jesus, in the context of a prayerful community, would better understand the meaning of Christian discipleship in the Nuclear Age. The book was well received, widely used by church groups across the US, and went into five printings.

Today, as in 1981, there is a great need for Christians, in light of their faith, to address the nuclear threat that imperils all life and to actively become Jesus' peace and justice makers. Today, in this time of perpetual war, there is also an equally important need to address and act on the related threat of climate and environmental devastation, which endangers all of creation. While this book is focused exclusively on the gospel response to the nuclear threat, I hope that the reader will keep in mind how this gospel study of the nuclear danger can also apply to the climate crisis.

As I write, another global crisis—the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak—has emerged, causing widespread illness, numerous deaths, and impacting every facet of daily life. Public officials have issued stay at home and social distancing measures, schools and churches are closed. For Jesus' followers, the gospel dictates our faith response to every challenge we face, including this pandemic. Jesus instructs us that faith is the antidote to fear, to trust in God, and to love our neighbor. Thus, our faith in Jesus compels us to stand for life wherever it is threatened, care for those in need, and act for justice. As we find creative ways to put our faith into responsible action regarding this crisis, we must demand that political officials redirect all funding for nuclear war preparations and from an exorbitant US military budget (\$738 billion in 2020) to meet urgent public health needs, to safeguard "essential" workers, and to protect and provide comprehensive testing and assistance for those most at risk—communities of color, the poor, elderly,

uninsured, unemployed, homeless, prisoners, and undocumented. This theft of the public treasury for warfare instead of health care is a sin and crime!

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many critical problems facing our society and world, but also countless acts of goodness, especially those of health-care workers and frontline workers. It has also helped many to recognize that to sufficiently understand its origin, treat, contain, and, ultimately, end it will require mutual cooperation by governments and people worldwide. Still, as the world struggles to cope with this pandemic and an uncertain future, the nuclear threat remains an ever-present danger. The pandemic serves as an ominous warning of the unimaginable reality that would ensue should there ever be a nuclear war. Consider the global effects of a nuclear war: annihilation of total societies, untold casualties, a cancer pandemic caused by nuclear radiation, widespread famine, nuclear winter, and an uninhabitable earth. The primary intent of this book is to encourage every conceivable effort to avert such a global catastrophe.

It was truly a gift and blessing to co-author the original edition of this book with Elin Schade and Chris Grannis. Henri Nouwen, who wrote the foreword, provided invaluable support for our joint efforts. Since its publication, Chris and Henri, both dear friends and exemplary followers of Jesus, have gone home to God. Now among the holy cloud of witnesses, they continue to inspire many others and me. Their faith-filled and loving spirit, along with that of Elin's, reflected in the discussion articles and foreword of the book, carries over into this new edition and graces its pages.

The original introduction to *The Risk of the Cross* provides a detailed explanation of the purpose and content of the book. In this edition it is important to make note of some new changes. The discussion articles in this new edition are primarily based on the original edition. However, these articles required some revisions in certain places for editorial reasons and in order to provide important new insights from more recently published biblical commentaries. The reader should know that the intention of the discussion articles is not to offer an intensive exegetical examination of Mark's gospel but rather to ascertain how the gospel calls us to be faithful disciples in a time of unprecedented peril.

The appendix sections contain many new pieces and have been updated to give the reader important current information about the nuclear issue.

Since *The Risk of the Cross* was first published, Ched Myers published a groundbreaking book on Mark's gospel: *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. This is the first commentary on the Gospel of Mark to systematically apply a multidisciplinary approach, called "socio-literary method." Myers integrates literary criticism, sociohistorical exegesis, and political hermeneutics in his investigation of Mark—the oldest story of Jesus—as a "manifesto of radical discipleship." In my view, this is the definitive book on Mark's gospel. I strongly recommend it as a companion resource to this new edition.

There are many invaluable insights from *Binding the Strongman* that have been very helpful to my interpretation of what the gospel writer Mark is trying to convey in his narrative of Jesus. One insight includes applying the following guidelines on how best to read and interpret a gospel passage: develop a narrative structure analysis of a gospel account; identify the plot and outline of the story; identify the setting; identify the characters; and develop a theme and conclusion.

Another key insight involves a recognition of two central themes that are in the background throughout reading Mark's gospel: "repentance" and "resistance." Living under the brutal occupation of the Roman Empire, Jesus declared: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). This repentance implies not only a conversion of heart but a turning away from empire. Jesus then calls his disciples to follow him, to proclaim the reign of God, and to nonviolently resist the forces of evil and death. Living in the US, an empire responsible for so much needless death and suffering in our world today, we need to heed Jesus' proclamation now more than ever.

In preparation for this new edition, I thought back to 1981, the year that this book was first published. The nuclear threat was as palpable and imminent then as it is today. There was open talk by government officials of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. Then, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists turned its "Doomsday Clock" to three minutes before midnight. Three years later, it was changed to a mere one minute before.

Today, due to the existential dangers of nuclear war and climate change—that are compounded by cyber-enabled information warfare,

undercutting society's ability to respond—the erosion of the international political infrastructure to manage these threats, upgrades to existing nuclear systems, and worsening world tensions, the “Doomsday Clock” is set to 100 seconds before midnight.

Other recent developments have further exacerbated the nuclear peril. Russia and the US possess an estimated combined total of over 12,600 nuclear weapons, many of which are on hair-trigger alert. Both countries are also developing hypersonic weapons that could become nuclear capable. US and NATO missile defense systems ring Russia and China, increasing already heightened tensions. A new US space force has been created to oversee military control and domination of space. The US is committed to a thirty-year upgrade of its nuclear arsenal at an estimated cost of \$1.7 trillion.

Additionally, the current US administration has threatened to use nuclear weapons against adversaries on several occasions. During this past year, the US withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal and the INF Treaty with Russia and carried out a subcritical nuclear test, a flagrant violation of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. And Pentagon policy makers have declared that a limited nuclear war could be waged and won, according to the new *Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations*. This doctrine is the latest manifestation of a long-held existing Pentagon policy positing that the US must be prepared at all times to use whatever military force is necessary, including the use of nuclear weapons, to protect its vital strategic and geopolitical interests in the world. The deployment in February 2020 of the “lower-yield” W76-2 nuclear warhead on Trident missiles, a smaller warhead the military believes is more usable, increases the risk of nuclear war.

Although humanity still remains on the brink of nuclear catastrophe, there have been compelling and courageous disarmament actions and initiatives by grassroots groups, plowshares activists, and peacemakers worldwide, papal pronouncements condemning the mere possession of nuclear weapons, NGOs like the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and the historic UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Also to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6–9, 2020, there will be numerous international actions calling for nuclear abolition. These are all signs of great encouragement and hope.

I am deeply grateful to Nick and Mary Mele, who have worked tirelessly on this book. Without their efforts it would not be possible to publish this new edition. Together, we hope that this new edition of *The Risk of the Cross* will help Catholics and all Christians to better grasp the absolute threat that nuclear weapons pose to all God's Creation and lead people to take nonviolent action to bring about a disarmed world. Moreover, we pray it will help Christians realize that to follow Jesus' way of the cross today requires that we nonviolently resist empire, systemic oppression, and all forms of violence.

The Hibakusha (A-Bomb Survivors) plead to the world: "Humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist." Martin Luther King Jr. exhorts us: "The choice today is... either nonviolence or non-existence." And Pope Francis declares: "The total elimination of nuclear weapons is both a challenge and a moral and humanitarian imperative of our time."

The crises of our time reveal how broken and unsustainable the established order is and present an opportunity for a global paradigm shift toward a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. We can no longer accept as "normal" those established institutions and structures founded on racism, greed, oppression, violence, and injustice that are destroying humanity and the planet. Now is the time to act in solidarity with people worldwide working for nonviolent social transformation. Dr. King proclaimed: "Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism." If the human family and Earth, our common home, are to survive, if the children are to have a future, we need to recapture the hope and revolutionary spirit that Dr. King speaks of and reject empire; abolish war, nuclear weapons, killer drones, biological and chemical weapons, and all weapons; end environmental devastation; and eradicate systemic racism, inequality, and poverty. Moreover, we need to commit our lives to the commandment of gospel nonviolence as we join with others seeking to create the Beloved Community, thereby making God's reign of love, peace, and justice a reality for our world. For with God all things are possible (Mark 10:27)!

Arthur Laffin
March 2020

Who is Jesus?

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we gather in your name to be healed and taught by you. In a world marred by manifest evils—starvation, poverty, war, disease, prejudice, crime, and the violence of lethal armaments—we recognize you as the One who can forgive our sins. You know our human condition, the often-contradictory longings of our hearts, and the powerlessness we feel in the face of such complex and pervasive evil. You know us as both victim and perpetrator, and still you offer us your healing and intimacy. We rejoice that you “have come for sinners, not the self-righteous,” because we know our need for you. Extend your reign in our hearts, teach us divine standards of judging and acting, and help us become new vessels of your Spirit. Empower us to resist all the forces of death that we and our society are bound by and to usher in your reign of justice, love, and peace. We ask this for the glory of your name. Amen.

GOSPEL READING

Mark 2:1—3:6; 3:22–27

DISCUSSION ARTICLE † Who is Jesus?

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus breaks onto the stage of history, his way prepared by the Baptist’s resounding cry in the wilderness: “One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (1:7–8).

Who is this Jesus, this more powerful One, who will baptize with the

Holy Spirit? These identity questions are pivotal to the message of Mark and crucial to the proper engagement of the reader in the journey of faith that the gospel envisions. The gospels are faith proclamations—not mere biographies—and as such they aim to elicit a faith response from the reader. For Mark, the faith response becomes an incarnation of trust, the fruit of a deep personal relationship. The central question of faith is: In whom do I trust? Not: What do I believe?

At the turning point of Mark's gospel, just as at the turning point of our lives, Jesus asks his would-be disciples two critical questions concerning his identity: "Who do people say that I am?" and, more important, "And *you*, who do *you* say that I am?" (8:27, 29). Like Peter, we must be able to answer personally. It is not enough to recite time-honored confessions, nor merely to mouth popular piety (8:27, 28). Jesus wants more than "lip service" and "empty reverence" (7:6). He searches our hearts for the childlike trust in his guidance that will enable us to journey with him to the fulfillment of the Christian mission—a way that leads to the life-giving sacrifice of the cross.

An authentic response to the question "Who is Jesus?" sets in motion a process of conversion that becomes a journey of faith and discipleship. The keener and truer our perceptions of Jesus' identity, the more radical our following him becomes. As we allow ourselves to be drawn further into the mystery of his person, our understanding and responsibility deepen proportionally. Discipleship becomes an imperative of faith; as a result, we take the pattern of Jesus' life and death as our own. We learn that Jesus' way leads to the cross but that, contrary to expectation, the cross represents not defeat and destruction but victory and healing. This gospel paradox, namely, that the way to preserve one's life is to lose it for the sake of Christ and the gospel (8:35), stands as the touchstone of true Christian fidelity.

The journey of faith begins at the Lord's invitation; he finds us in our places of marginal existence—in our personal Galilees—where we hunger for good news and the promise of liberation. There, the Lord announces a healing proclamation: "This is the time of fulfillment! The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!" (1:15). Our lives, our ways of seeing, judging, and acting are transformed by Christ as we experience his reign in our midst. We need to give ourselves over to the process of conversion and to be taught the path of discipleship. We are called to

journey from the place of initial encounter with the life-giving words and healing touch of Christ to the fullness of communion with his life and mission, cross, and resurrection. As disciples, we trace Christ's steps from the marginal places where hope first ignites, through the deepening of faith, to the test of love. Following Jesus, we gradually come to appreciate that the journey of discipleship leads inexorably to the cross and beyond the empty tomb to fuller life and renewed mission.

Conflict of authorities: divine or human

For contemporary believers, the *authority* of Jesus rests on his *identity* as the Christ and the Son of God; indeed, it is with just these titles that Mark introduces Jesus (1:1). For the first disciples, however, the opposite was true; they came to know Jesus' *identity* by first experiencing his *authority*.

Mark records the earliest reaction to Jesus thus: "The people were spell-bound by his teaching because he taught with authority and not like the scribes....All who looked on were amazed. They began to ask one another: What does this mean? A completely new teaching in a spirit of authority. He gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him!" (1:22, 27). From the beginning people sense a power and authority in Jesus they had not known before in their religious leaders. Jesus is different. His words authoritatively proclaim "a completely new teaching" and his actions convey the divine energies of mercy and compassion. People begin to wonder deeply: Who is this Jesus?

For each person in the gospel who responds to the revelation of Jesus' identity with awe and expectancy, another recoils with indignation at the presumption of his claims. To some, Jesus is the longed-for liberator; to others, he is a rank blasphemer and an insidious threat to orthodoxy. In either case, Jesus demands attention. One's perception of Jesus determines the nature of one's response; lines of allegiance and enmity form early and intensify with time. Mark carefully charts people's various perceptions of Jesus and their diverse reactions to him. We, reading the gospel today, respond to Jesus with the same diversity, and so it becomes our story as well. We are invited to enter into the Spirit's dynamic, which calls disciples in every age. The critical issues then become: What is my perception of Jesus? and What will be my response?

As early as chapter 2, the radical nature of Christ's claims begins to make its impact, and consequently, his authority is challenged by the guardians of the status quo. After sketching a typical day in the life of Jesus, Mark presents five rapid scenes depicting him in conflict with various opponents (2:1—3:6). Jesus' authority becomes the critical focus of each incident; each time his opponents ask more stridently: Why does he act in this way? What gives him the *right* to "violate" sacred traditions and ancient religious practices? These questions put to any other person would be legitimate, but because they are put to Jesus, there can be no satisfactory answer unless the questioner possesses a receptive faith. Jesus, as the decisive agent of God's Kingdom, is the Lord who rightly determines what is sacred or profane.

All five conflicts, by their imagery and content, enrich our understanding of Jesus' identity and at the same time disclose God's plan of salvation in Christ. In each incident, Jesus reveals divine values and priorities by word and deed. Conflict occurs when these divine standards—namely, mercy and compassion—clash with the stone-cold dictates of tradition or self-righteous piety. Jesus offers sinners fullness of life and divine intimacy, and his opponents resent him for it. Jesus requires conversion from his followers, but these opponents stand arrogantly secure in their knowledge of the law and the prophets. Their self-righteousness blinds them to Jesus and to the limitless compassion of the God he mediates. They refuse to abandon their constricting notions of God; with their paralyzed faith and withered love, they become countersigns to the healing Jesus has come to offer. The humble, the receptive, and the broken are healed physically and spiritually, while the proud and the complacent harden their hearts and close their minds (3:5). The contrast of responses is instructive for all disciples.

The paralytic and the man with the withered hand

The arrival of the paralytic carried to Jesus by his friends serves as the occasion for Christ to address a more crippling malady, the paralysis of spirit that arises out of sin and hardness of heart. Heedless of public ridicule and censure, four faith-filled friends of a paralyzed man tear open the roof over Jesus in order to lower their companion into his presence. Such faith and child-like trustfulness cannot go unrewarded; it is just this suppleness of spirit that Jesus is looking for and works wonders with. Jesus forgives the man his sins!

We may be disappointed with this solution to the man's dilemma. We wonder why at first Jesus seems *only* to forgive the man his sins and does not cure his paralysis. At the same time, we read that the scribes in Jesus' audience are horrified at his presumption. They deem it blasphemy on Jesus' part that he claims to exercise the *divine* prerogative to forgive sins. For us, the physical cure is the most miraculous outcome, but for the scribes, the spiritual healing proposed is utterly fantastic and, in fact, not to be believed. The vital connection between these two works of power—forgiving and healing—illuminates the story and provides its lasting significance.

In Jesus' day, every spiritual and bodily infirmity was viewed as a consequence of sin. Sickness, paralysis, blindness, leprosy, demonic possession—all proceeded from the same root cause, personal or inherited sinfulness. Therefore, in the people's minds, every time Jesus healed, forgave sins, or expelled unclean spirits it was a sign that God was at work rolling back the dominion of sin and death and establishing in its place the reign of divine life and mercy. All of Christ's healing, reconciling acts—both in his early ministry and in his mission's climax on the cross—were signs of God's promised victory over sin and death. Each healing gave substance to Christ's claim that the time of fulfillment and the decisive reign of God were at hand. Jesus, as healer and forgiver of sins, showed himself to be the agent of God's Kingdom.

Jesus' action in this gospel incident is decisive. He goes right to the heart of the problem—the release of the spiritual bondage of which the physical paralysis is only a sign. In each of the five conflicts in this section of Mark's gospel, Jesus holds out the promise of fuller life. He resists those things that stunt or maim human life—paralyzed bodies, sinful lives, narrow judgments, lifeless religious practices, unconverted hearts, and closed minds. Jesus stands for compassion, reconciliation, healing, and divine intimacy. These are God's priorities; any human standards to the contrary must undergo conversion.

Sadly, by the end of the fifth conflict, it seems that the paralysis Jesus sought to dispel in the first incident has reappeared to claim new victims. This time the spiritual immobility is clearly in evidence, not hidden under the guise of physical infirmity. And this time, the paralyzed—the Pharisees—stiffen at the far-reaching mercy of Jesus and thoroughly resist

his healing touch. Their behavior emerges as a cynical parody of the trusting foursome who brought their friend to Jesus. The Pharisees “kept an eye on Jesus to see whether he would heal on the sabbath, hoping to be able to bring an accusation against him” (3:2).

Jesus challenges these so-called religious leaders to exercise their teaching office wisely by distilling the essence of the sabbath law observance. “He said to them: ‘Is it permitted to do a good deed on the sabbath—or an evil one? To preserve life—or to destroy it?’” (3:4). Jesus argues that the purpose of the sabbath is to promote life and the good of people; how, then, can a rigid interpretation of the law that denies life and health be consistent with the divine intention. Their stony silence angers Christ; he is “deeply grieved that they [have] closed their minds against him” (3:5). There will be no healing for them, not because Jesus does not offer it, but because their sullen self-righteousness puts a barrier between them and God’s compassion. People such as these are the only hopeless cases. Refusing to admit their woundedness, they proudly rebuff the Healer’s approach, preferring instead to masquerade as fit and strong.

The promise of life

The two healing stories show Christ in opposition to the narrow limits certain people would place on the compassion of God, while the three intervening stories graphically convey the full life and divine intimacy Jesus offers to those who follow him. Whatever subverts human life must submit to the judgment of Christ. Jesus is the powerful “Son of Man [who] has authority on earth to forgive sins” (2:10). He alone can accomplish the cosmic healing that is the reconciliation of the human and the divine.

The three central confrontations involve incidents where Jesus is eating with his disciples. This meal context is highly significant, for meals symbolize intimacy and communion. People do not ordinarily break the bread of their lives with just anyone! Meals are celebrations of bondedness and kinship. At a meal the very substance of life is shared, and those who partake become sharers of a common life. Both Jesus and his questioners are keenly aware of this implication.

When Jesus dines with Levi, the tax-collector-turned-disciple, and his outcast friends, some scribes of the Pharisee party are scandalized by

Christ's implicit communion with sinners. They complain: "Why does he eat with such as these?" (2:16). For them, disdaining the company of sinners is a sign of righteousness. The problem is that all—except Jesus—are sinners! If he followed the scribes' human standard of judgment, Jesus, the "Holy One of God" (1:24), should disdain *their* company as well. But that is not God's way, the way of limitless compassion and unconditional love. Jesus offers everyone a chance to repent, even these proud officials. "People who are healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do. I have *come to call sinners*, not the self-righteous" (2:17). Jesus' is a ministry of universal healing.

The *full* realization of the healing, reconciling love of God in Christ will be celebrated in the great messianic banquet of salvation to which Jesus invites all sinners. He is to be the groom, the guest of honor, the cause of rejoicing at that wedding feast! He will consummate the marriage of the human and the divine that God has been preparing throughout salvation history. Jesus reveals the union that God desires and becomes himself the bond of that intimacy. This is the good news that Jesus announces in the third controversy, the apex of Mark's conflict exposition.

Replying to the criticism that his disciples neglect fasting, Jesus declares that since a wedding is in progress, fasting is inappropriate. With the groom's eagerly awaited appearance, the wedding feast of salvation has begun! His coming suspends ordinary activity; new ways of being and behaving are the order of the day. Jesus captures the necessary response of conversion in two concrete images: new wine in old wineskins and the new patch on an old garment. The mentality that suggests making do with the old—with minor adjustments for the new—is unrealistic and tempts fate. The new wine of the Kingdom will burst the old wineskins of religious formalism with its expansive vitality and power. A thoroughgoing conversion is required; we must become new vessels in order to contain Christ's spirit. Jesus warns of the danger of trying to apply our Christianity as a new patch on our otherwise unredeemed lives. Such efforts will be both futile and destructive. Instead, we must be made new. We must "reform [our] lives and believe in the gospel" (1:15).

By sharing the bread of his presence at a meal with outcast sinners, Jesus celebrates the communion which he—as groom—has come to offer. God and sinners are united in Christ if these sinners recognize the groom's

coming and respond by renewing their lives. Some trusted forms of the past, however, have become split and worn and now impede the overflowing compassion of God. These require renewal or replacement. In the final two conflicts the sabbath becomes just such a challenge.

When chided by the Pharisees for allowing his hungry disciples to pick and eat grain on the sabbath, Jesus draws a parallel between his act of authoritative compassion and that of King David. Using the Pharisees' own brand of scriptural argumentation, Jesus invites his opponents to a faith-filled perception of both the situation at hand and the underlying purpose of the sabbath. Jesus, like the revered King David, knows the ways of God and acts with divine authority. Besides aligning himself with King David—a messianic expectation in itself—Jesus stuns his Pharisaic audience by claiming: “The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (2:28), that is, he is God! The sabbath is the Lord’s day, and Jesus asserts his jurisdiction over it by reclaiming its divine intent: “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath” (2:27). Jesus, the Son of Man, of the line of David, is the messianic mediator of divine standards and authentic means of access to the divine. Jesus is the Way.

When Jesus defies the hard-hearted judgment of the Pharisees by curing the man’s withered hand, he seals his fate and journeys toward the cross. We read: “When the Pharisees went outside, they immediately began to plot with the Herodians how they might destroy him” (3:6). The lines of conflict are drawn. Jesus makes his stand for the preservation of life (3:4) and the restoration of people to wholeness.

Jesus, Satan, and the cross

Jesus’ mission and fate are further revealed as we look at the encounter of Jesus and the scribes later in chapter 3. The scribes claim that “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “He casts out demons by the prince of demons” (3:22–23). This characterization of Jesus is the ultimate blasphemy! Jesus responds by speaking to them in parables, saying, “How can Satan drive out Satan?” And that if a kingdom or house is divided against itself it cannot survive (3:24–26). He then declares that no one can break into a strong man’s house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man. Only then can the house be plundered (3:27).

What is Jesus exposing here in this parable? Jesus is stating his intention to abolish the reign of the “strong man,” that is, the scribal establishment represented by the demon in 1:24 (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, pp. 166–67). “Satan cannot drive out Satan,” Jesus proclaims! Jesus, in fact, is the One who has come to end the rule of Satan and to “liberate the prey of the strong and rescue the captives of the tyrants” (Is 49:24f.). He is the One who has come to establish the reign of God! This is the essence of his mission! Thus, Jesus’ proclamation of God’s reign, in nonviolent resistance to the rule of Satan, the established order and empire, will ultimately lead to the cross and his execution. Jesus was executed because his radical proclamation of the reign of God could not be tolerated by those in power.

Crucifixion was the primary method of capital punishment used by the Roman Empire to execute criminals, dissidents, and revolutionaries. It was the most shameful, humiliating, and excruciating form of death imaginable. Still, it did not prevent Jesus from being faithful to God and engaging in his prophetic nonviolent witness. Although Jesus experienced a torturous and agonizing death, he ultimately conquered the cross.

The cross of Christ becomes an occasion for reconciliation of the human and the divine. On the cross, Jesus hangs silently stretched between heaven and earth, a wordless parable of the reign of God overtaking a human heart, utterly transforming its frail capacities for love and sacrifice.

Jesus’ death on the cross is both a radical healing and an eloquent teaching. The cross of Jesus heals the malaise of the human heart: the sick hunger for power and invincibility, the self-righteous exclusivity, the paralysis of trust, and the despair of God’s promises of deliverance and new life. In place of these, Jesus teaches servanthood, humility, and forgiveness; he exemplifies the risks that open the human to the divine—faith, hope, and love. These totally accessible means of salvation light the way to God for all sinners. We do not need “to be like God”—the original temptation! We need only become like Jesus: loving, forgiving, faithful to our humanity, nonviolently resisting the forces of death and binding Satan, and consummately trusting in God.

Like Jesus on the cross, our human poverty and powerlessness, embraced and risked in loving fidelity to the plan of God, becomes salvific. God’s power blazes forth in human weakness. With this realization, we

can declare our own confession of who Jesus is: the Word made flesh, the Messiah, the Son of God!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Is there a criterion to be found in Mark's gospel that distinguishes a false conception about Jesus' identity from a true one? How do the disciples perceive him? Who do you say that Jesus is? How has your life experience affected your perception of Jesus?*

2a. *The Pharisees are not evil people, but they are led into an evil conspiracy against Jesus because they experience him as a threat. Discuss the occasions in the gospel reading when Jesus' behavior most challenges and outrages them.*

2b. *Robert Aldridge, in his article "The Courage to Start" (appendix 1, page 52), describes his experience in dealing with a similar challenge posed by his daughter. What are the values that shaped his life at work before his change? What values caused him to change his attitude and job? Identify the places in your life where your security and lifestyle are threatened by something new and challenging?*

3. *What do the healing acts of Jesus signify? What is the relationship between Jesus' acts of healing and his forgiving sins? Can you recall an experience in which your forgiving someone else—or even yourself—produced a healing power? How can the gospel dynamic of forgiveness and healing be applied to situations of international conflict?*

4. *Discuss the article's interpretation of the parables concerning new wine in old wineskins and a new patch on an old garment. What dangers does Jesus warn us about? Give specific examples. How do our habits and accustomed ways of thinking prevent us from being made new? Has your attitude toward war been made new because of your Christian belief?*

5. *What are the forces of death and systems of domination that need to be “bound” and resisted today? What are some of the manifestations of the reign of God that are visible in our world today?*

CLOSING REFLECTION

Mark 2:21–22

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If one should do so, the very thing used to cover the hole would pull away—the new from the old—and the tear would get worse. Similarly, no person pours new wine into old wineskins. If one does so the wine will burst the skins and both wine and skins will be lost. No, new wine is poured into new skins.