The Gospel of Mark, like each of the four Gospels, is a story of hope. But Mark’s is a story which is no easy read. The Gospel of Mark was sidelined within the Tradition, not only because Matthew, Luke and John are fuller, but because Matthew, Luke and especially John are less threatening, and less disturbing. A risen Jesus who reassures his disciples that he ‘will be with [them] always until the end of time’ (Matt 28:20) or who is ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life and that nobody will come to the Father, except through’ him (John 14:6) is far more attractive and consoling than a Jesus who dies crying out on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (15:34; Passion Sunday). This is Mark’s disturbing Jesus; he is a long way from the Jesus of John who can expire with the consolation that ‘it is accomplished.’ (John 19:30)

These fallible disciples are in stark contrast to a slew of ‘minor characters’ who model ideal responses to what God is doing in Jesus and his ministry: the poor widow whose two cent – all she had (12:44) – are given to the Temple and thus to God (12:42–44; Sunday 32), the woman who anoints Jesus to the chagrin of those who have designs on her extravagant gift (of 300 denarii – about €30,000 in today’s terms) but earns his protection and praise because she did all she could (14:8; Passion Sunday). There’s Bartimaeus who asks to see again and who persists in his request until his sight is restored … and then follows Jesus ‘on the way’. (10:52; Sunday 30)

Characters in Mark, leave all, only to be cast into a darkness to discover in and through who God really is and what God is really about.

This way is no easy way; it was not an easy way for Jesus, it was not an easy way for his disciples, it certainly is not an easy way for any disciple today. This way was not easy for Jesus; have a look at the constant stream of conflicts that envelop his ministry – conflicts with religious authorities, conflicts with his own disciples and, in the end, even conflict with God.

This way was no easy for the disciples. Peter and Andrew, James and John leave everything to follow Jesus (1:16, 20; 10:28). However, as the story progresses, they show a deep resistance to parting with their own funds; display rampant self-interest and ambition, are clearly exclusive; evidence a profound lack of self-knowledge, and a stark lack of courage.

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These ‘minor characters’ are not Jesus’ disciples! They appear in the story; we glimpse their generosity, their radicalness, their faith. They provide a snapshot of a world in which the goals of discipleship take flesh: in courage, openness, humility and total dedication. In short, all the things the disciples do not display—but disciples they are not!

The real disciples of Mark, like their master, are confronted with danger and death. In Jesus’ hour of need, they run away; even Peter, who returns to follow at a distance (14:54), denies and finally curses his master when attention is turned to him. But, in contrast to the wonderful minor characters, the disastrous disciples endure (13:13) with Jesus (cf. 3:14) … and he endures with them (16:7; Easter Vigil).

Séamus O’Connell introduces some key themes from the Gospel of Mark, which we read in our Sunday Eucharist this year
To read Mark well, we need to bear in mind that those who became the great apostles began their journey of discipleship as very compromised and very fallible individuals. This is the good news of Mark. Amazing disciples begin as profoundly fallible good news of Mark. Amazing discovery of our own weakness, disciples. Indeed, without the welcome the Gospel of God. Without blindness, self-interest, one cannot recognize the consequences of our weakness. For forgiveness, disciples will never be empowered to walk. It is surely indicated, are to the Gospel of Mark. Fresh and accessible.


Full colour and beautifully illustrated, Veritas presents the Gospel of Mark. This special edition makes a wonderful addition to any church, school or parish centre. Also featured is the Lectio divina, an ancient way of praying the scripture and promoting communion with God.

Ciarán O’Callaghan CSSR, The Year of the Suffering Servant – Getting More out of Sunday Mass in the Year of Mark. Dublin: Redemptorist Communications, 2011. €5.95/£4.95

A lectionary-based resource by one of Ireland’s finest teachers of Scripture who brings his deep knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures and his vast homiletic experience to bear in his reading of Mark.


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