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Foreword

by Daniel Berrigan

Long before publication, this work by Ched Myers accreted a remarkable history. West Coast to East, section-by-section, revised repeatedly, the manuscript made its way.

Here indeed, we quickly agreed, was a scriptural study to reckon with. It invited (and shortly received) serious pursuit: reading, meditation, passionate discussion.

Through Myers, Mark spoke, as the Quakers say, to our condition. It spoke most powerfully to those whose condition seemed remarkably akin to that of the early communities: those for whom, we are told, Mark's Gospel was first written.

Those of us who were so lucky as to come on the Myers manuscript saw our lives being both honored and beckoned. For some time we (like Myers' Mark; indeed, like Mark's Jesus) had been testing our mettle on strenuous terrains. Many of us who gathered for retreats and study, a current version of *Binding the Strong Man* in hand, were incurring the wrath of the titular gods: those daemons who guard the impassible borders of empire, the multicompany lairs, and nuclear sanctuaries.

Such Christians, coming together to catch breath and pray and reconnoiter, tend to regard ourselves as a species of occupied people, striving to free ourselves from the yoke and lash of the culture.

And then, through Myers, we met the early Christians called the community of Mark.

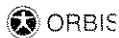
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You could see it in their faces, these children of a greater God, the God of refusers and renegades and resisters. Their look tended to a wide emotional range, from near despair to set purpose, to—now and again—near ecstasy.

Their set purpose was a different "way." Different with regard to work and its nature and rewards, with regard to children and women, with regard to the rights of humans—and the all-but-universal and official contempt of such

rights. A highly different view of the law; especially of laws whose manifest aim was to keep people ignorant, fearful, or numb.

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The tools and weapons of the "Strong Man" were a kind of demonic litany of the culture. The Christians knew it by heart: appetitiveness and sanctioned violence and the strut and lying and straining and achieving that were all the rage (in more senses than one).

And they refused to incant the litany. Not for them the slots, perks, ripoffs; nor the soft or hard fascism of the main mode of church and state, as currently practiced.

It was a small matter to them that the culture had, in fact, geared itself, been designed, in their favor. (Or so they were rather frequently assured by priest and parent.)

You grabbed and ran; that was it. And whatever devil (whether city shelter or welfare docket or mental hospital or city morgue) took those who were hindmost. It was a "style" straight out of the jungle, it made straight for the jugular. It was straightfaced, up front; it was the classic American "way" in the world.

Well, why not run with it? You had "class," were born to the manor, born to a market sometimes bullish, sometimes unaccountably sheepish. Born to free enterprise, to nuclear "security" and noisome political myth.

Born, if truth were told, to live and die, predestined to your slot; metronomes, clones, well-mannered and impeccable parasites.

Destiny, it was called. And on the grand scale, the imperial scale, manifest destiny.

But something else, Someone else, intruded. Vocation.

Some, those troublesome Markans, walked out on it all, "declassified" themselves in the Marxist sense. They would take no part in current social or sexual or economic idiocies, incompatible as such were with passion, imagination, faith, the work of one's hands.

Beginning in the civil rights days of the late fifties, Christians broke the mold. They broke iniquitous laws. They went to court, they went to jail. And many of them came out on their feet, intemperately asking for more.

If there was fault to be found with them (they found plenty of fault with themselves), it surfaced inevitably as time showed the true face of things—as it became apparent that America, having learned little or nothing from Selma to

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Hanoi, was hell bent on its perennial obsessions: greed and violence. Indeed, that these were shortly to be imbedded in politics; high crime in high places.

It came home. Resistance was to be the uneasy tenor and rhythm of life itself.

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Were we prepared for this? We were not.

Our plight was a serious one. How was resistance to endure, to show itself lasting and consistent in this land of Nid and Nod and Maybe and Mañana?

We were like amputees determined on a strenuous athletic contest. The prize was a noble one; the means were in serious question. How continue the arduous quest, the long haul toward the realm of God?

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Our need could be thought of under a double image.

A map that would point us, straight as a discharged arrow, in the direction of sources. Important beyond words, the need to know, vividly, concretely, where we came from, what symbols, words, events, communities had lived the gospel, in fair weather and foul, from the beginning.

And then another image. We needed a handbook brimming with encouragement: stories, instruction, discipline, reproof, irony, hope, valiance in the breach; we needed the beckoning hand—out of another time and place (but not really another)—of Someone to be trusted. Someone to indicate the way to go.

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The Myers manuscript, meticulous in scholarship and daring in scope, landed among us. And things have never been quite the same.

What a gift it was, and is! Myers plays mediator to Mark, in somewhat the way Mark had mediated Jesus. Pondering the manuscript was like entering a classic recognition scene, weighted with irony and hope, seizing the imagination, shedding light in dark places, challenging assumptions. We met our true ancestors, and learned and listened. We breathed the bracing air of new starts, we were introduced to the Way of Jesus, announced and lived out in the midst of conflicting ideologies and frenzies, the itch toward collaboration and violence.

What Jesus verified for the first disciples, Mark verified with disconcerting directness for his community, whose position vis-à-vis society proved very like that of the first disciples.

Like ours as well.

Which is to say, a community under fire.

Ched Myers
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Under fire we certainly were, and are; but who can describe a fire, who stem it, control it? Fire is the image nearest our situation; it burns, it destroys, it changes as it destroys.

The tinder is deeper and subtler by far than the decay and rubbish, the lethal landfill that smolders and mutters away under the thin crust of culture, under the murderous bonhomie, the nuclear installations, the cruel guarded borders, the lackey courts and jails.

In order to walk the fiery landscape, we had to know—whether our resistance were a mere curiosity or perversity (it was frequently stigmatized as both). Or whether, maladroit as we often were, and much given to backward glances and fear and trembling, we might still, in virtue of a summons beyond reckoning, might qualify as—disciples.

The culture came down hard on such aspirations. During the preceding decades, a kind of Procrustean arrangement, sometimes subtle, sometimes brutally direct, was put in place. Christian resisters against racism and war were persuaded to "fit in"; secularism was all the rage. Declarations of faith, whatever their form, were regarded as ill times, all but ill mannered.

A "religious left," a "Catholic left"? If that was all, if the tags matched the facts, we were in trouble indeed.

Procrustes and his bed proved to be a ruse, and a tormenting one at that. To fit the cultural measure was to die.

The rules of the game were strait and narrow indeed; there were few choices. Some who spoke up or acted up were judged inordinately forthright, too spirited. They must be cut down to size; only so would they fit the pygmy resolve of the age. Jail would do; so would exile.

Others, it was judged, were infected with an unseemly modesty; they must be persuaded to assume the guise of technological superman. So it was done; they were destined to "fit in," to join the culture, good, sensible, solid, taxpaying, in sum "disappeared."

Thus the method was clarified in the act. One measure allowed, one version of the human; a forced growth, a forced "coming to terms." In any case, spiritual mutilation, a violent alteration in nature. Homo Americanus emerged; from the point of view of spirit, a biological mutation, recessive, selfish, belligerent.

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Eventually (we were slow learners in this merciless school), the Christians came to a measure of understanding. Did one wish to be human in an inhuman time? If so, it would never suffice (if ever it had) to describe, tag, identify oneself as simply American, to conceal or downplay one's faith (the adjective "Christian" appended, an afterthought, a personal devotional matter; a kind of grammar of the hangdog, uttered with an air of vague diffused apology).

The lesson came home, hard. We must have at our disposal other, far different resources than the tormenting uniformity of the rack. The resources must be older, less questionable, more thoroughly tested than the times would allow—or could possibly grant.

In such a time, Mark's Gospel and the stunning insights of Myers came together, a happy conjunction indeed, a life line woven. Many of us would not hesitate to name the event providential. And to grasp and hold on, with all our might.

A phrase occurs: Myers' work is marked by a "new authority."

Of the older scriptural authority we had learned something in universities and seminaries; it proved, alas, of little help in the world we must walk, the fires underfoot.

Too abstract, too specialized, chary of the times and their questions, a game of artful dodgers and academic isolationists. The method worried the text, held it up like a dead specimen, turned it this way and that in one hand, in the other a dissecting tool. Words, words, words.

The inference was clear; at hand was a given text, foreign and undoubtedly venerable. And then there were other texts, equally venerable, of pagan origins.

And was there a difference to be noted, even passionately noted, between, say, the text of Mark and the text of Cicero or Sophocles? And if so, what, to a dissecting mind, might the difference be? Might it be a matter of faith, of an unmistakable (sometimes abrasive) style in the world, of that "way" to be confused with no other, either in direction or source or end? Might it be (horrors) that unpleasant matter of the cross?

Such questions were often brushed aside. The gospel text was gingerly passed along, honored by dispassion. Its words might flare into life, in the awakening of this or that student. But all such matters or events were outside the purview of class, study, method, plod—and the inevitable day of reckoning, the examination.

Such professors as we suffered under! Some would consider an expression of faith or passionate agreement or recoil or the shaking of the text into life—as a

breach of academic politesse. To be winced at, ignored, in accord with the code of the officers' club or the university commons.

The scribes took no chances, or very few; and the truth suffered, for the truth demanded chances, the chances the Truth-teller had taken, and suffered for the taking.

But the truth, never.

Myers took chances, dared to be passionate or indignant or ironic or loving. He renewed the sap of the text, the zest, the risky start, the hope of finishing. He drew the text into life, our lives—where indeed, by supposition, the text was meant to lodge, to discomfit, ennoble.

His method makes of the Gospel of Mark a veritable tract for the times. Mark announced the "new authority" of Jesus: an acute sense of tradition and an equally vivid respect for experience.

Tradition—a community intent on its task, its faith a drama and crisis. This, according to Mark, was the will of Christ, as it had been the will of the prophets before Him. Like a dry tinder the annunciation set his people, beleaguered as they were, occupied by a merciless power, humiliated and bereft of power, set them ablaze with hope.

And experience—life and its facts, its headlines, its unknown, ignored, anonymous victims. What of them? Who speaks for the speechless? Today, today the gospel must speak! Must discern the political realities and subterfuges, must proclaim the despised truth, defend the victims, judge the executioners, hold them accountable. This, or the gospel is a closed book, and we the betrayers of the hope of Christ.

And then what? The principalities, the weapons, the lies, the idols and their votaries, the spurious strength of the Strong Man—these have all the say and sway.

Myers refers in his first pages to the absurd presumption that scholars (or anyone else) come to Mark's Gospel as a tabula rasa, pure nous applied to the text. As though no special interest or passion or skin or economics or gender were intervening or brought to bear.

The presumption is by no means toothless; in fact it dictates the method. Exegetes become a species of "objective reporters."

We are only beginning to see, in the main through women and Third World theologians, not only the absurdity, but the arrogance that underlay the presumption of "objectivity." This while the heavy hints and the heavier facts, such realities as male, capitalist, white, pressed down on the scholarship, a nudge here, an innuendo there; in any case a coloration and bias.

In contrast, as Myers points out, biblical scholarship, rightly understood, is

heavily and rightly indebted to politics, follies and crime

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Myers of course brings his own bias to the text; he is quite forthright about it. The “bias” amounts in his case to an attentive analysis of the politics of Jesus; to that Way of defiance, loving, albeit courageous, toward the worldly powers that in His time and ours ravage the world and legalize high crime.

Iniquitous authority, lawless and spurious, must be cast from its illegitimate throne; justice must be enthroned. This is the work of Jesus. It proceeds in the community of Jesus.

Love, defiance. Instinctive affection toward persons, even the worldly powers; defiance toward their power, its malfunctioning and maleficence.

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One senses in Myers’ work a Jesus who would be accounted a stranger by many biblicists of the Western world.

But hardly new to the resisters of our lifetime, the base communities, the Christians hailed into courts and jails here and elsewhere, that noble “third world” that has invaded our own with its sublime evangel of liberation. A Jesus witnessed to in art and music and poetry and dance, the noble testimonies and testaments of the tortured and disappeared.

The glance He casts, that Jesus of Mark!, upon the world, in our direction too. A glance that takes much into account, that is both merciful and courageous, that ranges where it will, upon outcast, woman, child, the half-hearted, and the hero; upon harvest, coin, lurking scribe, snoops and parasites and betrayers, soldiers and their vainglorious superiors. A glance that rests with equanimity upon the powers that will destroy Him.

The glance rests on the disciples—nursing their pride, only half understanding, half wilful, boastful in good times and fretful and childish in the breach. All taken in, and taken into account.

And then the end, or the purported end, the showdown.

But on the third day. . . .

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And what of the “meantime,” our own time, that long sighing hiatus between Now and Then?

Let it be said that through Myers, we know our task better, and will perhaps set about it more resolutely. Entering the house of death, binding the Strong Man in the name of the Stronger! And seizing those larcenous goods, loosening that overbearing claim and clutch. Reclaiming our world, in the name of a far different Master. For hope renewed, for “beauty and valor and act,” this word of gratitude.