


Invited into the Markan paradox: The church as authentic followers of Jesus in a superhero culture

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Amidst contemporary culture's obsession with superheroes as the basis of the new mythologies of our day, and numerous religious communities' 'sterilized' version of Jesus, the church has to rediscover the paradoxical life and teachings of Jesus, as narrated in the Gospel of Mark. Within the honour-and-shame-based Mediterranean culture, within which Mark was written, Jesus' atypical demeanour and his radical teachings on self-sacrifice, coupled with his shameful death, were perplexing. His opponents did not find any proof in his scandalous teachings and inglorious outward appearance to confirm his messianic claims. In terms of the present obsession with superheroes, Jesus was never in a costume in public. He did not take on a temporary public persona in a staged drama *en route* to the cross. At all times, Jesus was the slave-like Son of God who came to serve and lay down his own life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). The crucified Jesus, stripped of all honour and godforsaken, is the paradoxical sign and physical embodiment of the kingdom of God. The risen Jesus is no different. He still is who he is. This largely undiscovered Jesus of Mark's Gospel must capture the imagination of the church all over again, the kind of imagination that elicits admiration, amazement and life-change. Only when the church begins to embody the kenotic route of Jesus that it will become clear to her and others that she, in fact, possesses paradoxical 'superpowers' – the self-sacrificing kind.

Keywords: superhero; church; Gospel of Mark; Jesus atypical; Graeco-Roman deity; identity; paradox; discipleship.

The church is many things to many people: a place of worship, a religious community, a keeper of religious traditions, a space to avoid, a judgemental environment and so on. To some, the church is a hospital for sinners; to others, it is a museum for saints. No wonder scholars are endlessly fascinated by this institution and continue to study it from various theoretical approaches, such as racial equality (Baloyi 2018), postcolonialism (Wafula, Mombo & Wandera 2016), leadership (Branson & Martinez 2011), power (Frawley-O'Dea 2007), violence (Masango 2018), sexual orientation (Glucas 2012) or missionality (Tyra 2013). Amidst this plethora of scholarly approaches to the church, this study focuses on the need for an ecclesiological rediscovery and authentic embodying of the paradoxical narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark within the framework of a contemporary culture obsessed with superheroes.

They like Jesus more than they like the church

Scepticism towards the church is shared by a growing wave of observers, critics and activists, who often project their negative feelings to Christians in general. The American sociologist Yancey (2015:13, 15) speaks of an 'anti-Christian' bias in this regard, which he understands as 'an irrational animosity towards or hatred of Christians or Christianity in general'. According to Yancey, 'Christianophobia' is rife in academic circles, where Christian academics are judged beforehand to be narrow-minded, or even fundamentalist, in their beliefs. In his research with Gabe Lyons on non-Christians' views of church-going Christians, Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) conclude:

Most people I meet assume Christians are conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders, they want to convert everyone, and they cannot live peacefully with anyone that doesn't believe what they believe. (p. 26)

Interestingly, this growing negativity towards the church and Christians is not projected *sito-sito* to Jesus. Kimball (2007:38–40) mentions the interviews he and his team held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where less than 2% of the students actively participated in the activities of Christian organisations. Churches have even branded it as a 'pagan campus'. Instead of asking typical

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questions (e.g. 'Are there moral absolutes?', or 'How does one obtain eternal life?'), Kimball's team opted for the following ones: 'What do you think of when you hear the name Jesus?', and 'What comes to mind when you hear the word Christian?'. The responses were surprising. All of the respondents were positive about Jesus: 'He is beautiful'; 'He is a wise man'; 'He came to liberate women'; 'I want to be like him'; 'I love Jesus'. But when asked: 'What do you think of Christians and the church', the students' responses were far different: 'The church messed things up'; 'They took the teachings of Jesus and turned it into dogmatic rules'; 'Christians don't apply the message of love that Jesus gave'. Kimball's conclusion is aptly expressed in the title of his book *They like Jesus but not the church* (2007).

Although Pope Francis has referred to this popular slogan of 'loving Jesus without the church' as an absurd dichotomy, a 2017 report by the Barna Group found that this religious subsection has grown to 10% of Americans, up from 7% in 2004.¹ Many in this group do not attend church because they are still suffering from church wounds. Others, however, believe that they can find God elsewhere because the church is not personally relevant to them.

A 'sterilized' Jesus?

How is it possible that outsiders are open to Jesus, but not to the church? The church should be a safe, invitational space that is supposed not only to worship God and facilitate the coming of his kingdom in the world, but also (Wright 2010):

... [T]o build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as fellowship. (p. 211)

But, above all, the church is meant to be about Jesus, about exemplifying him and living his life of love and self-sacrifice. But herein lies the disconnect: the Jesus of the modern-day church is often a watered-down, domesticated version of the Jesus of the Gospels. The New Testament scholar Käsemann (1977) offers a perturbing explanation as to why Jesus has been turned into a powerless figure in the church, of all places:

People and institutions do not like to be kept continually on the alert, and they have constantly devised screens to protect themselves from too much heat. In fact, they have even managed to reduce Jesus' red-hot message, which promised to kindle a fire throughout the world, to room temperature. (p. 87)

Sadly, Jesus' 'upside-down' redefinition of reality that gave rise to an ethos based on status-reversals and self-denial on behalf of God and others in the earliest church was turned upright again in numerous religious circles throughout the centuries. Modern-day representations of Jesus are, to a large extent, still defined by institutionalised religious spaces, as well as by a dated imagination deeply influenced by religious representations of home throughout the centuries (cf. also Joubert 2017a:289).

1. <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church/>.

It is a risk to rediscover and follow Jesus, detached from religious adornments and ecclesiastic packaging. That is why '...the real Jesus has been replaced by a "sterilized" Jesus who apparently has no healing influence on society' (Joubert 2012:14–15). The church has domesticated, tamed and silenced Jesus. Still, there is hope, as Nadia Bolz-Weber (2015) points out:

There are many reasons to steer clear of Christianity. No question. I fully understand why people make that choice. Christianity has survived some unspeakable abominations: the Crusades, clergy sex-scandals, papal corruption, televangelist scams, and clown ministry. But it will survive us, too. It will survive our mistakes and pride and exclusion of others. I believe that the power of Christianity—the thing that made the very first disciples drop their nets and walk away from everything they knew, the thing that caused Mary Magdalene to return to the tomb and then announce the resurrection of Christ, the thing that the early Christians martyred themselves for, and the thing that keeps me in the Jesus business—is something that cannot be killed. The power of unbounded mercy, of what we call The Gospel, cannot be destroyed by corruption and toothy TV preachers. Because in the end, there is still Jesus. (p. 10)

Facing the elephant in the room: Contemporary culture's obsession with superheroes

What would be the reasons for the ever-growing chasm between contemporary culture and the church? Apart from holding on to a watered-down, uninspiring image of Jesus, the church does not always read culture correctly, let alone speak the language of popular culture. She does not spot the elephant in the room, namely, a contemporary global culture obsessed with superheroes. Over the past few years, this superhero culture has become part of our world more than ever, as reflected, among others, by the fact that the two most popular movies in the world in 2018 were 'Avengers: Infinity War' and 'Black Panther', with at least seven other superhero blockbusters filling the top 20 spots.² Locally, superhero movies such as 'Aquaman', 'Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse', 'Venom' and 'Ant-Man and the Wasp' also dominated box office sales for most of 2018, with 'Black Panther' breaking all previous records.³ The church's 'loudest' responses to this superhero culture ranges from ignorance, to sceptical theological replies warning against the dangers of anything from docetism, adoptionism, to modalism in modern-day superhero myths (Miles 2018), to uncritically attempting to turn God into a contemporary superhero (Lopez 2013). No wonder 'the world of the superhero is largely a secular one' (Miczo 2016:58).

Superheroes provide numerous escape routes into fictional realities as forms of protest against the monotony of everyday existence. At the same time, they embody formative visual narratives, or 'narraphors',⁴ within an unstable and

2. <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/worldwide/all-movies/cumulative/released-in-2018>.

3. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/southafrica/>.

4. Semiotician and theologian Leonard Sweet coined this term as a reference to narratives integrated with metaphors. He is aware of the fact that words are no longer the language of this culture. We are living in a culture where we are less dependent on words and more dependent on pictures, narratives and metaphors (cf. Sweet & Viola 2012).

unpredictable reality that refuses to make any sense. Costumed superheroes have indeed taken centre stage in society's never-ending game of cultural semiotics.⁵ Superheroes live their lives as a masquerade, lives defined by a dual identity, with their costumes as signifiers of this duality. Costumes also mark superheroes as 'other'. When donning their costumes, individuals take on their super-identity that literally turns them into superheroes. These superheroes exist in multiple worlds (i.e. a so-called 'multiverse'). They often operate in hypertime while combatting supervillains who also exist in the same spheres.

But the most fascinating aspect about superheroes is their special costumes, which mark them out as proponents of exoticism, special powers and change. As Bongco (2000:17) points out, the discourse implicit in their costumes is far from being simply an arbitrary set of conventions because popular superheroes '... are recognisable even just in their silhouettes or in more abstract renditions, and are identifiable through colour and/or shape combinations'.

As is the case with all important signs in culture, the cultural iconography inherent in the never-ending array of superheroes supports an array of interpretations. Hence, the initial and more traditional superheroes of the previous century (the so-called 'Golden Age' and 'Silver Age' of Comic Books – as suggested in current essays edited by Oropeza 2008:33–196) represented an unchallenged response to the existing ideological orders and social issues. Their views, positions and battles as champions of true justice were the right ones; their reasons for donning costumes and fighting villains were morally justified. However, contemporary superheroes from the 'Third Age and Beyond' of intersecting media (as suggested in current essays edited by Oropeza 2008:197–268) find themselves in an increasing dystopian reality. Even if contemporary superheroes do not always offer an easy way out of the dystopian realities they encounter, their promotion of personal ideologies establishes new connections with the agendas and dreams of disillusioned individuals in contemporary culture. Thus, 'superheroes have proven remarkably able to adapt to the problems and societal changes of each generation without fundamentally changing as characters' (Boudreaux 2017:xvii).

It would seem that contemporary Hollywood film, in terms of its preoccupation with superheroes, is a unique cinematic space (Radovic 2014):

... in which mythological narratives have been expressed and promoted on a global scale. The myths embedded in the ideological constructs of these films have been widely exploited and refabricated by filmmakers – new mythmakers. (p. 86)

Focused on the quest for ultimate meaning, the Church cannot afford to ignore Hollywood's dominant global role as

⁵They are visual extensions of our never-ending fascination with superheroes throughout history. Chris Gavaler (2018) identifies eight types of superheroes in this regard, namely, the mythic superhero, the imperial superhero, the wellborn superhero, the vigilante superhero, the fascist superhero, the mad superhero, the Black superhero and the gendered superhero. This cult of superheroes represents '... the inferred challenge to the social order (Eco's Barbarians) and the means of survival – through the exposition of virtues that might have been considered to be past their prime' (Reynolds 1992:87).

a kind of ideological factory by using superhero characters to promote themes of 'otherness', civil religion, 'just war' and new definitions of sexuality in their cinematic narrative.

The atypical Son of God

To come to terms with an imaginative, authentic narrative of Jesus within a culture obsessed with superheroes, I shall briefly turn my attention to the Gospel of Mark. It is my contention that the church does not need new systems, structures, liturgies, leadership models, conferences and so on, to reinvent herself in this new global culture. She needs an encompassing, inspiring, imitable narrative of Jesus, one that is not tainted by consumerist religion's 'quick-fix Jesus', or the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' of children's Bibles. The radical, largely undiscovered Jesus of Mark's Gospel has to capture the imagination of the church all over again. Only then she will produce individuals and communities of authentic storytellers who will want to share and embody this meta-narrative about Jesus, one that is grounded in a temporally and logically coherent structure, within which a new reality is represented and given significance and relevance (cf. Longo 2015:4).

Without getting trapped in the intricacies surrounding the genre, date and historical setting of Mark, this gospel offers us the earliest coherent narrative picture, albeit through a theologically stained window, of the identity of Jesus. According to Tolbert (1989:30), 'it is a self-consciously crafted narrative, a fiction, resulting from literary imagination, not from photographic detail'. This does not mean that Mark has no connection with history because the story of Jesus is deeply embedded herein while also laying claim to the ontological, extra-textual reality of its main character.

Amidst persecution and sociopolitical uncertainties that formed part and parcel of the original readers of Mark's daily realities in approximately 65–70 CE, the author also addresses the fears and concerns of a larger, predominantly non-Jewish audience in the Graeco-Roman world (Garland 2015:80). He does this, among other things, by painting a coherent narrative picture of Jesus as the atypical Son of God in terms of his unassuming presence, suffering and slave-like behaviour.

Throughout the gospel, Mark focuses on the identity of Jesus. All who encounter him, from the people of Capernaum (Mk 1:27), the scribes (Mk 2:7), the disciples (Mk 4:41), the inhabitants of his hometown Nazareth (Mk 6:2–3), to the high priest in Jerusalem (Mk 14:61), speculate about his true identity. However, God knows exactly who he is. Not only at the beginning of the Gospel (σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός – Mk 1:11), but also in the middle of the narrative, God identifies Jesus as his beloved Son (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός – Mk 9:8). He is the one through whom God acts to bring his kingdom. As the super-antagonists in the narrative, demons also possess supra-normal comprehension regarding Jesus' true identity as 'Son of the Most High God' (Mk 3:11; 5:7). However, the high priest in Jerusalem does not share this recognition of who Jesus

really is (Mk 14:61). As the official head of Israel's religion, he perceives Jesus as a blasphemer and a threat to their religion. He consequently orders Jesus to be crucified.

While dying on the cross, Jesus is publicly ridiculed by means of the plaque erected at the cross-referring to him as 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:26). Onlookers also mock him as a messianic failure who promised to destroy and rebuild the temple in 3 days (Mk 15:29). Religious leaders taunt him as utterly helpless to save himself from this humiliating death (Mk 15:31). Not even Elijah, the greatest prophet in the history of Israel, can save Jesus in this instance (Mk 15:35–36). But, immediately after his death, the Roman centurion at the cross endorses him publicly as Son of God (Mk 15:39). His confession at this crucial moment serves as 'the climactic Christological statement of the Gospel' (Boring 2006:434). On the cross, Jesus fulfils God's will that he must suffer and die, and consequently be raised from the dead (Mk 8:31). The centurion's utterance thus resonates with God's revelation of Jesus' true identity.

In paradoxical fashion, Jesus' identity is disclosed in his shameful death on the cross. In fact, his life-giving words and miraculous works throughout Mark can only make sense from the perspective of the cross. Until now in the Gospel, the crowds were constantly amazed and filled with fear in the presence of Jesus (cf. the use of θαμβέω and φοβέω in Mk 10:32). However, the religious leaders, who adhere to different codes of religious purity, did not find any proof of God's presence in his scandalous teachings and inglorious outward appearance as the 'running slave of God' (cf. also Joubert 2017b). They are convinced that Jesus, without any external distinguishing marks to confirm his messianic claims, is the devil incarnate (3:22). Ultimately, they have him crucified. No middle road, in this instance – the Markan Jesus is either the super-impostor, or he is the Son of God who dies a humiliating death.⁶ But it is exactly in this world, permeated with cultural and religious stereotypes, one in which people's bodies serve as a 'microcosmic map of reality' (Glancy 2010:20), that the naked and dying Jesus, stripped of all honour and godforsaken, is the paradoxical sign and physical embodiment of the kingdom of God (cf. Joubert 2017a). No wonder Kelber (1976:179) states: 'If there is one single feature which characterized the Markan Jesus, it is contradiction or paradox'.

No superhero: The unpretentious presence and walk of the Son of God

According to Best (quoted in Gray 2008:13), Mark uses expressions of motion more frequently than any other evangelist. The Markan Jesus is constantly on the move (e.g. Mk 1:9, 12, 14, 21, 29, 35; 2:13, 23). References to the way or road (ὁδός) are used 17 times throughout the Gospel, while the adverbs εὐθύς and εὐθέως [immediately] are used more than 40 times. The frequent repetition of these adverbs, coupled with the rush of narrated events, creates the impression that urgency is the order of the day throughout

6. Crucifixion was viewed as the most scandalous and shameful form of execution in the Roman world. It was reserved not only for the political enemies of Rome, but also for terrorists, slaves and low-life criminals (Cook 2014:418–423).

Jesus' public ministry. However, these descriptions of a 'fast-paced' Jesus who hurries to come to the rescue of the sick, the impure, the sinners, the social outcasts, or his disciples are more than simply a Markan literary motif. According to Joubert (2017b):

To the first readers, it would have communicated the opposite of a graceful, quiet or relaxed gait indicative of honourable males in the ancient Mediterranean world. Hurriedness was usually associated with people of low public status, but also with the gait of slaves, since it was expected of them to go about fast. Commands to slaves were frequently prefaced with the imperative 'quick' (Wrenhaven 2012:58); hence the Roman expression *servus currens*, the running slave. (p. a2100)

In a world where anything from bodily posture, movement and gesture served as visible indicators of a person's identity, character and social status, Jesus looked and walked differently from honourable Mediterranean males. O'Sullivan (2011:21) tells us that the ideal Roman male walked slowly, '... with total control, his head and shoulders upright and confident, metaphorically towering over those beneath him'. As a matter of fact, nobles were intentionally raised and educated to walk slowly, but then again '... not too slow, for that marks a lack of effectiveness' (Corbeill 2004:122). According to O'Sullivan (2011):

... [T]he body that attracts attention to itself automatically excludes its bearer from the ranks of the upper-class male, and a particularly conspicuous or expressive gait – whether too fast or too slow – is an easy way to draw such attention. (p. 20)

Jesus constantly deviates from this composed gait because he is always in a hurry.

Jesus does not fit the script of an honourable male. In slave-like fashion, he hurries around and draws wanted and unwanted attention to himself. This atypical 'Jesus walk', which is defined by humility and urgency, attains meaning in the framework of, and gives meaning to, his provocative words and deeds, including his constant transgressions of religious purity codes by, for example, touching lepers (Mk 1:40–45), forgiving sins (Mk 2:1–12), eating with sinners (Mk 2:13–17), allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23–28) and so on. Within the hierarchical ancient Mediterranean culture, with its pivotal values of honour and shame, the Markan Jesus has no shame, that is, no sensitivity for his public reputation. Because, according to Malina (2001:30), people's honour was, at that time, dependent on their value in their own eyes, as well as in the eyes of their social groups, the only logical conclusion is that Jesus' consistent, atypical demeanour and movements reflect his true inner character.⁷ Clearly, his outward appearance is not a mask that is donned in public and removed again in private. It is no stage role either.

7. According to Miller (2013:4, 6), '[a] person's character primarily consists of her character traits and the relationship between them'. He then goes on to describe character traits as 'a disposition to form beliefs and/or desires of a certain sort and (in many cases) to act in a certain way, when in conditions relevant to that disposition'. In turn, Hauerwas (1983:39) states that '[c]haracter is not merely the result of our choices, but rather the form our agency takes through our beliefs and intentions ... character is not a surface manifestation of some deeper reality called the "self". We are our character'.

Contrary to the radiant comportment, posture, movement and gesture also associated with the glorious presence of Graeco-Roman deities, Mark does not place any emphasis on the divine nature of Jesus either. Representations of these divinities in anthropomorphic forms in numerous statues and votive reliefs emphasise that their bodies were always superior in strength, beauty, stature and sheer presence to human beings.⁸ Although the actual bodies of the gods are not described in any detail in ancient sources, because they were, by their very divine nature, elusive and inaccessible, their divine presence was always highlighted. They did not simply aspire ‘... to imitate the human bodily form, they frequently exceeded it both in size and by turning the divine state into something more perfect and gleaming than the human body’ (Kindt 2012:44). Not only the outward appearance, but also the gait of Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses differed from that of mortals when they traversed the earth (Hamori 2008:93). Their walk was always the divine presence in motion.⁹

The impressive presence and gait of Graeco-Roman deities gave away their divine nature, even when they appeared in disguised forms. However, the Gospel of Mark intentionally presents Jesus as the slave-like Son of God. Not only his suffering and shameful death on the cross, but also his physical appearance and hurried movements reflect his humble, unassuming presence. Mark makes no explicit mention of extravagant garments, superhero costumes, physical posture, demeanour or comportment befitting the divine status that Jesus possesses as the Christ (Χριστός) and the Son of God (υἱός τοῦ θεοῦ – Mk 1:1).¹⁰ Because the first readers shared the general beliefs and perspectives prevalent in the ancient Mediterranean world regarding the expected outward form of deities, they would have found Jesus’ atypical look, demeanour and slave-like gait very puzzling. Besides the fact that he has neither an occupation, nor any worldly power, he does not have the outward appearance of the deities, as the so-called superheroes of the Graeco-Roman myths.

Contrary to the typical superhero character, both ancient and contemporary, which Brownie and Graydon (2015) understand as an artificial construction, presented as a set of colours and shapes in representation of a set of values, Jesus is never in costume in public, forced to perform according to

8. When they took on anthropomorphic forms, their beauty, power and glaring radiance were visually striking. ‘For instance, when Priam spoke with Hermes, he referred to him as δέμας καὶ εἶδος ἀνθρώπος (‘wondrous in body and form’ – // 24.376). In turn, one hears that Helen’s child Hermione had the εἶδος of golden Aphrodite (Od 4.12–14). In the Homeric hymns (278–279), one also reads of the glory emanating from Aphrodite’s immortal body and cheeks’ (Joubert 2017a:276).

9. Joubert (2017a:278) refers to Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1.402–405), where we read how Aeneas and Achates, after being shipwrecked, stumble upon a woman in hunting garments who tells them where they are. When she walks away, her identity as the goddess Venus is revealed in her lofty manner of walking. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (3.609–610), Acoetes senses the god, Dionysus’ true divine identity in his outward appearance, clothes and rank, despite his clever disguise, because the clothes of deities usually shone brightly and reflected their origins and identity (cf. *Hymn. Aphr.* 1.86).

10. However, in Mark 9:2–8, there is the transfiguration scene on the mountain where God affirms the heavenly identity of Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah, both of whom make a *post-mortem* appearance as the most important figures of Judaism, as well as the disciples Peter, James and John. Only in this instance in Mark a brief metamorphosis of Jesus’ body takes place, although he is still recognisable to all.

those rules laid out by, and represented in, what he wears. That is why he never has to ‘dress down’ after performing his mighty deeds to take on a different, private persona.¹¹ At all times and everywhere, Jesus is the slave-like Son of God. He is also the one who came not to be served, but to serve and lay down his own life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). The risen Jesus of Mark 16 is no different. He still is who he is, and he does what he has been doing all along. Mark does not even express his identity in terms of a new glorified body, but rather in terms of his character and identity as the risen Jesus who continues to go before his disciples to Galilee where it all began (Joubert 2017b:a2100. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i3.2100>). It is still Jesus, the divine, yet slave-like Son of God who now leads his disciples.

The urgent call to metanoia and discipleship

In contrast with the ‘stylised’ Graeco-Roman deities and their elevated presence when they take on anthropomorphic forms, the atypical presentation of Jesus throughout the Gospel of Mark points to the fact that he is not merely an exemplar of general, ethical qualities, or a stereotyped deity. On the contrary, his presence, as well as his teachings and selfless deeds, reveal a new understanding of reality, including fresh new categories of honour and shame. Jesus turns reality upside down. His story, as it unfolds throughout the Gospel, is embedded in a positive, imitable evaluation of humiliation (shame), suffering, selfless sacrifice and servanthood.

The cross, in particular, serves as the dominant conceptual metaphor not only to organise, but also to facilitate and ethically align the character formation and conduct of believers with that of Jesus. In other words, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus serve not only as testimony to his true identity, but also as the normative ethical paradigm for the readers of the gospel, both past and present. His walk, his presence, his servanthood and his suffering provide a new imagery and ideological imagination that facilitate the nature and content of the corresponding ethical demand upon the lives of his followers. In the words of Schnelle (in a reference to the apostle Paul, which is also applicable to Mark [2007:296]): ‘*Der Weg Jesus zum Kreuz begründet die christliche Existenz und ist zugleich wesentliches Kriterium dieser Existenz. Das ethische proprium christianum ist somit Christus selbst ...*’.

The Gospel of Mark calls on its readers to participate in the life of Jesus. In fact, Jesus (Mk 1:15) now calls for *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*). As a radical change of identity and life orientation, *metanoia* simultaneously reshapes an individual’s identity by means of his or her personal transformation and relocation into the new community of Jesus followers. Mark does not

11. The conundrum of ancient deities and superheroes, namely, that the civilian wardrobe denies extraordinariness, while the superhero costume denies ordinariness (cf. Brownie & Graydon 2015), is no problem for Jesus because he never takes on a different temporary persona in a staged drama *en route* to the cross.

identify this new movement as the church. However, he does allude to the fact (Harrington 2001):

... [T]hat the Church is to be a sign of the presence of God's kingdom, and a symbol of hope for its future fullness. To enter God's kingdom is to acknowledge the sovereignty of the God of Israel (who is the Father of Jesus) and to follow the way of Jesus. (p. 4)

Hand in hand with the call to *metanoia*, Jesus calls people to a life of discipleship (cf. Mk 1:16–0; 2:13–17; 8:34; 10:17–31). The call is literally to follow him (with the term ἀκολουθεῖω, 'to follow', occurring no less than 18 times in Mark).¹² Although it is a relational, personal and Christological call, the collective nature of discipleship is also evident throughout Mark. As part of the new vineyard of God (Mk 12:1–11), or sheep in the flock of God (Mk 6:34; 14:27) or partakers of his new covenant inaugurated at the Passover (Mk 14:24), Jesus' disciples are called into community with each other. In Mark 3:31–35, the metaphor of family is also used to describe how Jesus' call to obedience to him should be embodied among his followers.

The Gospel of Mark paints a compelling picture regarding the life-changing implications of the call to follow Jesus. *Metanoia* implies an alternative new symbolic universe, a new identity, new significant others, new roles and a new mission, also for the contemporary church. Present-day communities of faith also need to be taught in imaginative, yet hermeneutically responsible ways to embody the radical nature and content of *metanoia* and discipleship. They should come to terms with the fact that Jesus is not a supplement to, or another celebrity in, history's never-ending gallery of deities and superheroes. He is the magnetic alternative. Sadly, the stagnant image of Jesus taught in many churches brings little to no change. It does not give rise to imaginative expressions of discipleship, as expressed in Mark.

Humble new roles for Jesus' followers

In the so-called discipleship catechism of Mark 8:22–10:52, where the focus is on the suffering of Jesus and a corresponding discipleship of the cross, his disciples are confronted with four new roles (cf. Mk 8:34–38; 9:35–37; 10:13–16, 42–45). Firstly, Mark 8:34–38 focuses on cross-bearing. Because the cross is at the heart of Mark's Christology, it is not strange to hear that the cross, along with the self-sacrifice, humiliation and death it entails, will also define what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Following him is clearly not about self-promotion or status-seeking.

After Jesus' second prediction of his suffering and death (Mk 9:31), and a second failure of the twelve disciples of Jesus to understand his teaching in this regard (Mk 9:32), they have an internal discussion as to who is the greatest.

12. The word μαθητής [disciple] occurs forty times in Mark (always in the plural), as well as with '... a possessive that distinguishes Jesus' disciples from others, the crowd, or the disciples of John the Baptist (2:18; 6:29), or the Pharisees (2:18). The gospel of Mark tells us not only who Jesus is and what God has done through him, but also what it means to respond to the good news in becoming his disciple' (Garland 2015:389).

Jesus responds by telling them that, if they want to be first, they should be last of all and the servant (δίακονος) of all (Mk 9:35). Once more, Jesus clearly subverts all assumptions regarding status and roles inherent in the honour–shame-based culture of the day by deliberately selecting the lowly position of servant for them all. Paradoxically, this is also the new 'super-power' that Jesus imparts to his disciples. Their influence and power as servants will not derive from self-advancement, but from self-sacrifice, from the disposition to serve rather than to be served.

To impress upon the disciples, the necessity of humbling themselves for the sake of others, Jesus presents them with a third new role in Mark 10:13–16, namely, that of a small child (παιδίον). Already in Mark 9:37, Jesus made it clear that whoever welcomes one of these little children, welcomes him and his Father.

In Mark 10:13–16, after the disciples rebuked the parents who brought their children to Jesus to be blessed, he tells them that the kingdom of God belongs to such ones. As a matter of fact, only those who receive the kingdom like a little child will enter into it. In other words, grow smaller and become children again, along with the risks of loss of status. In the ancient Mediterranean world, children were not romanticised. They were vulnerable, unimportant, often unwanted and had no rights, power or status whatsoever.¹³ 'Becoming like little children' implies relinquishing all claims of dominion and power over others by occupying the lowest rung of any social status hierarchy in ancient families (cf. Mercer 2005:53).

The disciples did not really grasp the true identity of Jesus, or the nature of his mission. This is illustrated by the request of James and John for the two most important seats in the eternal glory (Mk 10:35–40). Therefore, Jesus once again repeats his earlier point that the greatest among them should be their servant (Mk 10:43). As a matter of fact, he has an even lower fourth role for them to embody, namely, that of a δοῦλος or slave: 'Whoever wants to be first among you is to be slave of all' (Mk 10:44). Slaves were at the very bottom end of the scale of all human beings. With their cringing postures, averted eyes, hurried movements, lowly garments and silenced tongues, they were denied all basic forms of dignity and respect. Both slavery and servanthood were cultural realities in the world of Jesus and his disciples; however, whereas servants mostly performed household duties, slaves were more vulnerable. They had no right of command to determine how, when or what to do (cf. Wrenhaven 2012). Jesus' disciples have to follow suit by taking up the role of slaves. In fact, whether in a 'physiognomically conscious' Graeco-Roman world, where individuals' appearance serves as semiotic indications of their character, or in our contemporary world obsessed with outward appearance and superheroes, the challenge facing readers of Mark's Gospel is to follow Jesus by embodying the humble roles of cross-bearers, servants, children and slaves.

13. According to Horsley (quoted in Mercer 2005:53), '[i]n ancient Palestine, as in most any agrarian society, children were the human beings with the lowest status. They were, in effect, not-yet-people'.

Losing the cape: Embodying the Markan paradox

'The kingdom is attained by paradox' (Von Wahlde 1985:54). It is about losing one's life to save it (Mk 8:35). It is about being a slave of all to be first (Mk 9:35; 10:44). This kind of paradox, as Kerr (in Santos 2003:7) rightly explains, tends to be in conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.¹⁴ Paradox suggests a statement, a view or a way of life at odds with common sense and the prevalent, popular opinion, a paradox that deserves serious attention, because it may be true. At this point, Mark invites his readers to follow Jesus, whose true identity is both hidden and revealed in his unconventional, slave-like presence. The unexpected and often contradictory nature of the ministry and message of Jesus reveals that true life is about sacrifice to the extent of losing all social status and personal honour. Therefore, Mark constantly emphasises Jesus' pedagogic use of paradox (Santos 2003):

... [I]n order to urge the readers implicitly to identify themselves with the value system of Jesus (which involves a reversal of the world's values or standards) ... Mark expects them to make a decision for life-change. This decision is to be reflected in their acts of servanthood that affirm God's authority over their lives. (pp. 12–13, 15)

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God as a subversive new reality where self-sacrifice, humility and servanthood are honourable in God's eyes. 'It is the world upside down, where social structures are devoid of their apparently absolute value and thus dispossessed of their power' (Rossell Nebreda 2011:312). Even when his followers do occupy positions of power, these are characterised '... by humble service precisely because this is how Jesus' rule is described' (Winn 2018:110). In timeless fashion, Jesus represents and personifies this disruptive, yet alluring, reality where love, respect and selfless sacrifice triumph. No wonder his message still has such a wide appeal nowadays, and people like him, even though they do not always like the church. People are hungry for more than yet another bunch of imaginary heroes dressed up in strange costumes, or fictive deities entrapped in their own egos and endless power displays.

Nowadays, the Gospel of Mark demands a new audience, the kind that desires to be challenged and surprised and, if successful, '... elicits specifically admiration, amazement and wonder' (Colie, in Santos 2003:12). If the church would take the risk of fully immersing herself in this paradoxical narrative, she has an opportunity to escape from her own boredom with religion and all the lifeless practices that gave rise to a 'sterilized' Jesus. Then she will also realise that (Myers 2014):

¹⁴ Sweat (2013:14ff.) offers a good overview of the development of paradox, from the ancient idea of surprise and unexpectedness, to the more modern understanding of paradox as a clash of equally valid, contradictory claims. In other words, a paradox occurs when claims are held together even when they are individually probable, but jointly inconsistent.

Mark wrote to help imperial subjects (in the first century and today) learn the hard truth about our world and ourselves. The story of Jesus does not pretend to represent the Word of God dispassionately or impartially; it was written about, and for those engaged in God's work for justice, compassion, and liberation in the world. To the otherworldly religious, Mark's Jesus offers no 'signs from heaven' (Mark 8:11–12). To scholars who refuse to commit themselves concerning the life and death issues of the day, Jesus declines engagement (Mk 11:30–33). But to those willing to risk the wrath of empire, Jesus offers the way of discipleship (Mk 8:34ff.) – which Way he not only proclaims, but embodies, thus empowering us to follow. (p. xi)

For the contemporary church, it is all about losing the cape (cf. Stanford 2018). A lifestyle of passionate care for outcasts and people on the fringes of society will go a long way towards making the church appealing again, in the midst of contemporary superhero aficionados and groupies who urgently need real-life heroes, the types that constantly pour out their lives in selfless service and love for others. As Leonard Sweet (2008:192) states: 'Only bottom-up relationships built on respect and reciprocity have any chance of making a different world'. Followers of Jesus need to be taught that, in their new roles as cross-bearers, servants and slaves of Christ, they have surrendered their 'privilege of choice'. Their identity is now caught up in Jesus as their Lord. They faithfully follow in his footsteps by surrendering themselves in selfless service to him and others.

Authenticity, integrity, humility and face-to-face relationships are more important than ever in this artificial culture of superhero mythologies, with its special powers, costumes, dual identities and escapist narratives. Within the turbulent, rapidly changing landscape of the third millennium, this entails walking not in front of, but beside others, shoulder to shoulder. It implies sharing life together, connecting and helping others to belong, believe and become, in that order (cf. Helland 2013:33–34). When the church rediscovers and embodies Jesus' kenotic route creatively and passionately, it will become clear to both herself and others that she does, in fact, possess paradoxical 'superpowers', the self-sacrificing kind.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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