The Mission tells the story of an 18th century Jesuit mission to the Guarani peoples in Northeastern Argentina. This historical film explores grace and redemption even as it recounts destruction and loss. As I read our texts this week, I kept thinking of The Mission. This week Kelly and I re-watched the film, and encountered afresh the story of kingdoms in conflict.

In different ways, our texts this Sunday bear witness to this kingdom of God that has already arrived in Jesus Christ and is already unfolding in the communities of faith. And yet, these texts do not deny the conflict between a kingdom of love and a kingdom of darkness that infects the world with death and destructive tendencies.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus sends out pairs of seventy-two disciples into the towns and places where he was about to go. Each group of two witnesses proclaims the coming Kingdom of God, offering the peace of God and the healing grace of the kingdom. Yet, in his instruction, Jesus makes it clear that not every home, not every city will welcome the witnesses. If the people reject the Good News of God’s kingdom, the witnesses become heralds of judgment.

Then Jesus declares a series of woes to various places that will not embrace the message of the kingdom. Jesus is speaking prophetically. For within a generation, Rome will destroy Jerusalem and the people of God will again be dispersed to the four winds. This will not be the first time or the last that the people of God will pass through the fire, awaiting God’s promise that evil will be vanquished and His kingdom will shine out in the light of unquenchable love.

Today, I want to meditate upon the blessing of the Kingdom as well as the conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God.

The sending out of the 72 is a joyful event. The disciples bring a word of peace and a demonstration of healing. They stay with the people, eat with the people, and share with the people the joyous reality of God’s kingdom. When the kingdom of God draws near, there is a tangible experience of God’s presence and God’s goodness. As Paul writes in Romans, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 14:17). We are people of the kingdom and this same joyful expectancy should be revealed as we gather and as we go out.

The disciples return with some dramatic stories of encountering and overcoming evil powers. Jesus reminds them that power over the evil one is not the supreme cause for joy but they should rejoice because their names are written in heaven. The cause for great joy is being loved by God and being gathered up into His community of love. This called out family of Christ followers will face difficult times. At the crucifixion of Jesus or later during times of suffering, they will face the threat of collapse, but the Spirit of God will preserve them.
As the people of God, we gathered up into a community that is always learning and relearning to rest in the promise “that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

In our Galatians reading, we see a picture of life in this community. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2). Paul, the Pharisees, the interpreter of Torah, now reads the ancient law in light of Christ. In Christ, in grace, we live by the law of Christ, the law of His love. Our lives image His life poured out for others.

Even now in the midst of this world of struggle and challenge, we model the kingdom of God by bearing the burdens alongside those around us. He is not saying that some people sit back and relax while others care for them. For “each will have to bear his own load.” But he is saying that we help those in need, we restore those who are struggling, we sow into the lives of one another in word and deed. We exhort one another all the more as we see the day approaching.

In The Mission, Captain Rodrigo Mendoza is a mercenary and a slave trader. He goes into the forests to capture Guarani and sell them as slaves. As he is capturing slaves, he encounters Father Gabriel who has started a mission among the Guarani and is teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Father Gabriel pleads for mercy, but Mendoza shows none.

Later, Mendoza kills his brother in a duel and enters into an extended time of grief. Father Gabriel ministers to him and invites him to come to the community. Mendoza is not ready for mercy but penance. So he ties his armor and weapons to his back and carries them through the river and up the falls to the Guarini. Fr. Gabriel realizes that Mendoza will carry the burden until he comes to the place where he is ready to let go and receive grace. After a difficult struggling climb straight up the rocks, Mendoza reaches the Guarini tribe.

One Guarini runs at him with a knife. At first, it appears that he will kill Mendoza, but then he cuts away the burden from Mendoza and throws it down the waterfalls. In this act, he demonstrates forgiveness from the very people Mendoza has hurt. This scene has always made me think of the Galatians passage. The outsider, the sinner, the very one who violated the community is now welcomed, is now restored as a brother in Christ.

This is the story of the Apostle Paul. The very man who sought to destroy the church is welcomed into the family by the grace of God. He has known the grace of being restored by God and by God’s people, and now he is reminding the Galatians to be the tangible expression of God’s kingdom in the way they love, serve, and humble themselves before one another.

Preserving this community of love through humility and gracious actions is a manifestation of the Spirit. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:25, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.” Restoring a fallen brother, encouraging the weary, walking alongside those who are struggling are all signs of the Spirit. Miracles and healings and deliverance happen in the community of God. But the great cause for wonder is a community that actively practices forgiveness and gentleness toward
one another. These frail and often struggling communities of love will be the very force of God’s manifest love that stands against the darkness of Rome.

Make no mistake. The kingdom of God is being revealed in a world of darkness and sin. In The Mission, Fr. Gabriel and the monks form a community of love and service among the Guarini. The people learn to make and play instruments, sing songs of worship to God, and welcome the outsiders even the former slave trader Mendoza. This Jesuit mission is a beautiful manifestation of God’s kingdom, but it is also under threat.

The Portuguese and the Spanish conspire to destroy this community and capture these people as slaves. Eventually, the community is burned to the ground and the priests die with the people. It is painful to watch and a reminder of the very real war between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

This film visualizes the kind of suffering Jesus sees coming to Jerusalem. The Temple will be burned to the ground and the people killed. Even as he faces his own impending crucifixion, he is preparing a people who will face the destruction but know a hope beyond death. As we look across history, it might be easy to think the Kingdom of God was simply not strong enough to stop the never-ending movements of human cruelty, greed, and destruction. Even today we see places where Christianity is facing extinction, where people are suffering at the hands of despots, where evil abounds.

But the Gospel reveals hope beyond the threat of sin and death. So if we look back across history, we will begin to notice little communities of hope in Christ whose witness in the middle of dark and dreadful places continues to echo in the world long after they’ve passed away.

At some point between the 6th and 9th centuries, a movement emerged in Ireland called the Culdees, or servants of God. This was a renewal movement that focused on keeping alive the faith proclaimed by St. Patrick and early Celtic saints. This movement was not strictly monastic in the typical definition because it included married people who worked and also practiced rigorous devotion. We probably still remember the Celtic Christians today because of the Culdees. They traveled between Ireland and Scotland and Wales and eventually across Europe. They formed small communities of faith, they preserved books, they maintained simple disciplines of faith, and they passed down their faith in the harshest of circumstances.

Some people include St. Columbanus in this movement. Columbanus was the greatest Celtic missionary and may have planted up to 100 communities of faith across Europe. He said to the people, “Make haste and press into the evangelical kingdom while yet the door stands open. There is coming a night in which you shall not be able to find the way of life, and your feet shall stumble upon the dark mountains.”

After the Norman invasions in the 11th and 12th centuries, the Culdees and many Celtic monasteries were crushed, impoverished and disbanded. Yet, we continue read the books and poems and prayers passed on from these simple communities.
In the dreadful and difficult 14th century, we discover the Modern Devotion movement. Small lay communities across Northern Europe that lived simple lives of prayer and devotion. Thomas a’ Kempis joined one of these communities and wrote guide for instructing novices. His little book, *The Imitation of Christ*, would influence people across Europe and even play a role among the 16th century Reformers.

There are little communities like these and like the one in *The Mission* found all across history. Many of these communities are small, frail, and subject to a much more powerful invader or government. And yet, they worshipped faithfully and simply, trusting in the faithfulness of God.

As we read Revelation on Monday nights, we continue to encounter a word of hope given to frail and threatened communities in the early church. The words of the Revelation keep reminding the readers that God is faithful and his kingdom will prevail.

In Revelation 11:15, the seventh trumpet is blown and loud voices in heaven proclaim, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” The destroyers of the earth have been destroyed. By the time we reach the end of the book, all the evil forces have been consumed in the lake of fire and we are taken to a city of beauty, of glory, of healing and hope and reconciliation. A society of perfect love. The perfection of worship and the glorious vision of our Lord.

We are a people of hope, a people of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. We carry the message of God’s Kingdom within us. We proclaim the faithfulness of the Father through the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit each time we gather. But we also practically live out this hope by living in light of the kingdom now. We bear one another’s burden. We encourage those who are weary. We serve. We sing. We read. We teach.

We live into the same faith and hope in Jesus Christ that has sustained countless communities across time. As we see the darkness in our world. As we remember our brothers and sisters who suffering, we press into the love of Christ. We become instruments of his love in all that we say and do, trusting that His kingdom is and will come, on earth as it is in heaven.