THE GOSPELS

GOD WITH US

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What is a Gospel?

The word “Gospel” comes from the Anglo-Saxon word godspell that means “good news.” The Greek word that the Gospel writers use to describe what they wrote for other Christians is εὐαγγέλιον, which is also translated as meaning “good news.” While Gospels have been around for almost 2000 years, when Mark wrote his Gospel it wasn’t as though its first readers looked at it and said, “That’s a Gospel alright!” They would have thought it looked and sounded like a biography of a famous person, philosopher or teacher. It’s true that the Gospels hand on sayings and teachings of Jesus but they are more than that because they set out to change the life of the reader forever.

The Gospels Timeline

Birth of Jesus
Death and resurrection of Jesus
Gospel of Mark written
Gospel of John written

Common Era (CE)
30 CE
33 CE
40–50 CE
60–70 CE
80–90 CE
90–100 CE

Jesus’ public ministry begins
Paul’s ministry journeys

As John writes:
30. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

(John 20:30–31)

The Gospels set out to change the life of the reader forever.

DID YOU KNOW?
The Gospel writers would have been very surprised to know that their collections of the sayings and deeds of Jesus would still be read nearly 2000 years later. They hoped that Jesus was going to return in their lifetime (Matthew 16:28) but they also wanted to make sure that the traditions of Jesus would be passed on accurately to the next generation of Christians. They pass on their understanding of the person of Jesus and what they have learned about what it means to be a Christian.

IN YOUR WORDS
Read John 20:31 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.
saviour
leader
mankind
hope

Messiah
a king sent by God to rescue the people from oppression

John 20:31
30. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
The Messiah
John tells us a great deal about Jesus as the Messiah (anointed king) and Son of God, and the life that comes through Jesus to those who believe in his message. That all sounds well and good, but we need to remember that many people did not see Jesus like this at all. In a guard-room on the Palatine Hill in Ancient Rome a piece of graffiti was found that has a crucified figure with the head of a donkey. This is an example of the ways that Christians were made fun of and ridiculed because they believed in Jesus.

For many people the message about Jesus was understood very differently.

This ancient graffiti reads: Alexamenos worships his god.

St Paul had many experiences of being rejected for the sake of the Gospel and he shares his experience when he writes to the Corinthians that:

\[
\text{22} \quad \text{For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,}
\]
\[
\text{23} \quad \text{but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.}
\]
\[
\text{24} \quad \text{but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.}
\]

(1 Corinthians 1:22–24)

DID YOU KNOW?
A Roman historian, Seutonius, in his Life of Claudius wrote that the emperor expelled Christians from Rome because they were seen to be “continually making disturbances”. It was the Roman Emperor Nero who persecuted the Christians and falsely blamed them for burning the city of Rome.
I am with you always

From the point of view of the people of Jesus’ time he was not the Messiah, or the Son of God, or a Rabbi. From a Jewish point of view he was a blasphemer, and from a Roman perspective he was a revolutionary. Despite the dangers of being disciples, many Christians still chose to follow Jesus and believe in his message. Whatever the world said, they were convinced that something had happened in Jesus that was going to change the world.

When Matthew talks about the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, the reader is told that Jesus has a name of great significance because his name, Emmanuel, means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). What could be better news than to say that God is with us? When Jesus is ready to leave his disciples after his resurrection he tells them to remember one very important thing: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

DID YOU KNOW?
There are over 42 titles that are used in the New Testament to describe who Jesus is and what he does. They include titles such as Son of God (Matthew 4:3), Saviour (Luke 2:11), Teacher (Mark 4:38), Lord (Matthew 8:2), and Christ (Mark 1:1), Emmanuel (“God-with-us” Matthew 1:23), Prophet (Luke 7:16), the Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20), the Author of Life (Acts 3:15), the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

IN YOUR WORDS
Read Matthew 28:18–20 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

disciple
a believer who accepts and helps to spread the teachings of a person

Matthew 28:18–20
18 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

faith

practice

pupil

document

doctrine
What were the Gospels written on?

The Gospels were originally written on either papyrus or parchment. This was expensive, and so in the early days of the Church there were not many copies.

When they began writing the Gospels, it was not in Jesus’ own language of Aramaic. They used Greek, which was the common language used around the Mediterranean. You might be surprised to know that the first manuscripts didn’t even have chapter headings or verse numbers, or even spaces between words! Not only that, they were written in capital letters. It was only later in the 13th century that Stephen Langton invented a system of chapter headings. In the mid-16th century, Robert Stephanus developed a verse numbering system to help people find their way around the Bible more quickly. The Bible was printed and more people began to read.

This is a great example because you can see just how delicate the papyrus is. What is amazing is how long these first written Gospels have lasted, especially since they need to be kept warm and dry, otherwise they rot.

Some of the writing was done on parchment—a material that was very durable. In the earliest time, writing was done on papyrus sheets made out of reeds that were woven like a fine mat. It was less expensive and light to carry. Here is a Greek manuscript of Luke from the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland.

Here’s an example from Codex Vaticanus in the 4th century talking about Jesus and John the Baptist and people walking around in fine clothes in kings’ palaces.

The Gospels were first written in Greek.

Matthew 11:8-10

10 This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’

In your words

Read Matthew 11:8-10 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

prophet, messenger, scrivener, representative

did you know?

The Bible was the first mass produced printed book. It was printed in Mainz, Germany, by Johannes Gutenberg from 1452-1455.

This is a page from the first bible printed by Johannes Gutenberg. The text is in Latin. The coloured initials and illuminations were hand drawn after the pages were printed.
When and where were the Gospels written?

The stories of Jesus were first passed on by word of mouth. The sayings and deeds of Jesus were first preserved by telling and re-telling the stories. Unlike our own time, people were extremely good at remembering all sorts of information. They had to be. It was not only expensive to write, but most people could not read or write.

In time, the first generation who were eyewitnesses to what Jesus said and did, died. The early Christians felt that it was important to put things down in writing so they would not be lost. They didn’t have computers, of course, but putting things in writing was like storing information on a hard disk drive on your computer.

Another reason that they didn’t write things down in the first decades after Jesus’ resurrection is that they believed that Jesus would return at any moment.

As time went on, they realised that Jesus was not going to return soon, and that they needed to make sure the next generations of Christians had access to his life-giving words.

The sayings and deeds of Jesus were first preserved by telling and re-telling the stories.

Jesus had said:
28 “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

(Matthew 16:28)

Kingdom
the way that Jesus describes the reign of God

Matthew 16:28

28 “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

IN YOUR WORDS
Reed Matthew 16:28 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.
domain
ruler
realm
territory

DID YOU KNOW?

At the time of Jesus most people could not read or write. They estimate that somewhere between 10–15% of the general population could read. We know from Luke 4:16–19 that Jesus could read from the Scriptures in the synagogue in Nazareth. That would have been most unusual for a carpenter.
Why were the Gospels written?

The Gospels are not like books that are published today that indicate the name of the author, the place and date of publication, the publisher, and the title inside the front cover. The Gospels themselves don’t give too many clues as to the identity of their authors. We shouldn’t be too surprised about this, since their concern was to pass on the message of Jesus rather than focus on themselves.

Our best guess is that the Gospels were written sometime between 66–100 CE. It is generally agreed that Mark wrote the first Gospel at some time around the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 CE. Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis in Turkey around the end of the first century, wrote that Mark was not an eyewitness, but a disciple of Peter, and that he wrote down Peter’s memories of Jesus.

DID YOU KNOW?

The traditions about Jesus were first handed on by word of mouth. Mark committed them first to writing about 66–70 CE for a community of Christians living with the danger of persecution. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus talks about Christians falling away on account of persecution (Mark 4:17).

fisherman
a person who catches fish for a living or for pleasure

Mark 1:16
16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Mark 1:16–20 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible:
casting   disciples
mending   mission

[The Gospels were written to pass on the message of Jesus.]
Jerusalem’s destruction

It is likely that Luke and Matthew were well aware of Jerusalem’s destruction. It may well be that sayings such as Matthew 27:25 where during the trial of Jesus the people cry out: “His blood be on us and on our children!” indicate that Jerusalem’s destruction was already well in the past. Another text that indicates this is Luke 21:20–24 where it predicts that Jerusalem would be destroyed and how the people would suffer. It is most likely that this had already happened.

Both Luke and Matthew were written after Mark and it looks as though they used the framework that Mark developed, and then added to it with materials that they shared in common. To those sayings and deeds of Jesus they add other stories that only they include. Examples of this are of only Luke including the parable of the Prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) and only Matthew includes the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31–46).

Was Matthew a tax collector?

The traditions about Luke are that he was the physician mentioned by St Paul in Colossians 4:14 and that Luke was one of his trusted co-workers (Philemon 24 and 2 Timothy 4:11). There is a tradition that Matthew is the tax collector who is mentioned in Matthew 9:9. It is highly unlikely that the person who wrote the Gospel of Matthew was a tax collector because they know the Scriptures so well and weave it into their Gospel.

DID YOU KNOW?

Tax collectors were disliked and considered traitors at the time of the Gospels because they collected taxes from their own people to give to Rome. They were direct and constant reminders that the land of Israel was occupied by a foreign power.
How many Gospels are there?

We are so used to hearing about the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John that we naturally assume that these were the only Gospels written. In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, we are told that many others had written Gospels before Luke. Luke doesn’t call them by name, but certainly knows that other Christians felt it was important to tell the story of Jesus in their own way.

It’s like the remakes of the movies that we know and love. How many times have people made movies about the Three Musketeers or adapted novels like Pride and Prejudice? It’s similar to when a director decides to do their own version of a well-known play and people look forward to the way they will tell the story – putting their own spin on the plot and the characters.

The Gospels all tell the story of Jesus, but in their own way. At that time it was expected that each person would write the story in their words, and with some variation, otherwise there would be no reason to write down exactly what someone else had said. The Gospels are always according to someone, such as according to Mark and his point of view. They would have been delighted in the different way that Mark, Matthew, Luke and John told the story of Jesus.

**Did You Know?**

The first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are called *synoptic* Gospels because they give a similar account of Jesus’ ministry. Synoptic in Greek means “having a common viewpoint” or “seen side by side”.

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**Title: Proclamation of John the Baptist**

**Matthew 3:1-2**

(Info: Begins with the introduction of John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness and quoting the Prophet Isaiah who said they should prepare to make way for Jesus and repent for their sins.)

**Scene 1**

**Setting:** Wilderness – a natural landscape away from the city

**Main Character:** John the Baptist (young man), wearing a camel-hair coat with a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts (grasshoppers) and wild honey, preaching at people to repent, prepare their sins and be baptised.

**John**

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

People stare at the wild-looking man, but John is passionate and continues to preach even more loudly.


(Info: Begins with a historical timeline of when John the Baptist arrived on the scene and then quoted Isaiah.)

**Setting:** A montage of images of the Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pontius Pilate, King Herod, High priests Anna and Caiphas and palaces/Temples where they lived, including the regions. Scan to John the Baptist in the wilderness – a place that is remote.

Enter John, a wild looking man, preaching and calling out to people to be baptised.

No physical description of John the Baptist in Luke.

**John**

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

He screams at some of the crowds who are not good enough to be baptised, yelling out “vipers” and tells them someone greater than he is coming.

**John**

Someone who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

Soldiers come to arrest John by order of Herod. John is imprisoned.
How were the four Gospels chosen?

There were many more Gospels written than we have today, but we have more than you might realise. There is the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, even the Gospel of Judas, to name but a few. You can find them in collections called the New Testament Apocrypha that contain books that weren’t included in the New Testament as we have it today.

Actually, it took some centuries before the Church decided on the four Gospels that we have today. They tested them all gradually and it took time. Remember they didn’t have printing, as that would not be invented for another 1400 years. They had to copy everything by hand and it would have taken a long time before Gospels were copied on their travels from Jerusalem or Turkey or Greece to Rome and other parts of the Roman Empire, as it was then.

Our world is so different – we have access to information almost instantly. It is very hard to imagine a time when everything was copied by hand and then carried over long and dusty roads, or across the sea. In those days a letter from Paul, or a copy of a Gospel, could take months to get to its destination.

[It took some centuries before the Church decided on the four Gospels that we know today.]

1 Corinthians 1:10

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions.

IN YOUR WORDS

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10–14 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

agreement  united  appeal  belonging

DID YOU KNOW?

St Paul spread the message of Jesus before the Gospels were written. In fact, three years after his conversion he visited Peter in Jerusalem to hear from him directly about Jesus’ teachings and sayings. (Galatians 1:18)

- This painting by Valentin de Boulogne (Circa 1600) is titled “Saint Paul writing his Epistles.”
What’s the process of writing a Gospel?

There were many stories about Jesus and each Gospel writer would select some stories, expand others, or delete ones that they didn’t think were important.

If someone asked you to write a Gospel you would do the same thing. You know about Mark, Matthew, Luke and John and you would make your own choices about what sayings of Jesus you like, and what events in his life you would like to emphasise. The basic framework is so well known that it would be shared, making sure that you talked about Jesus’ baptism by the Jordan, his ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee, with the climax of Jesus’ death and resurrection in Jerusalem. That would provide a basic framework, then you could add different elements that were important to you or to your readers.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The Gospels are hard to categorise. They look similar to biographies, but they don’t tell the whole story of Jesus because they focus mainly on the last three years of his life. We hear little about his childhood and nothing about his adult life as a carpenter. The Gospels were written so that we would believe that Jesus is the Son of God.
Jerusalem’s destruction

In order for your Gospel to read well, you would have to give it some shape and organise your story, and you would have to have some way for the readers to follow the plot and signposts along the way so they wouldn’t get lost. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John had to do the same thing.

Luke is fond of previews and reviews. Luke makes sure that we have some key predictions in the text that let us know who Jesus is and how we are to see him. Events like Jesus going to his hometown of Nazareth are great examples. Luke takes the story and places it right at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and then makes sure we get the message about who Jesus is and his mission. He does this by describing how Jesus applied the words of the prophet Isaiah to himself being sent to give sight to the blind and freedom to prisoners (Luke 4:18–19).

Luke makes sure we get the message about who Jesus is and his teachings.

Luke wants us to get the following message: that even though Jesus will be rejected and people will want to kill him, he will rise again and the story will go on.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the Gospels, Jesus quotes from the Scriptures at least 41 times. The Gospel writers used the Scriptures to help their readers understand how Jesus and his mission were part of God’s saving plan. Matthew often speaks about how Jesus brought prophecies from the Scriptures to fulfilment (Matthew 1:23; 2:6,15,18,23; 4:15,16; 8:17; 12:18–21; 13:35; 21:5).

oppressed
those subjected to harsh and unfair treatment

Luke 4:18
18 “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Luke 4:18–19 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

recovery release captives predictions

Good Friday in Jerusalem.
Gospel beginnings

Both Matthew and Luke want to tell the story of Jesus by starting at the beginning so they tell about how Jesus’ birth was announced and how his story fits into the story of God caring for the people of Israel. Don’t be fooled into thinking that they are the same! Even though there are lots of details where they agree, such as Jesus being born in Bethlehem and growing up in Nazareth, there are differences in their versions. Matthew focuses our attention on the faithfulness of Joseph, while Luke places emphasis on the faith of Mary.

Mark’s Gospel is different. It starts with John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness for the people to prepare for the promised messiah – the king that they were waiting for. He would be the one to free them from the Romans and lead them to a time of peace and prosperity.

John’s Gospel goes back beyond the stories of the birth of Jesus to the dawn of creation. John wants to show us that if we want to understand God’s creation of the world and the big scheme of things, we need to see Jesus as the Word of God who was involved right from the beginning.

[John’s Gospel goes back beyond the stories of the birth of Jesus to the dawn of creation.]

IN YOUR WORDS

Read John 1:10–14 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

grace flesh messiah Word

DID YOU KNOW?

Christian thought took some time to develop as the early Christians continued to pray, talk together, and come to understand who Jesus was and how he fitted into God’s saving plan for all the world.
What groups were there at the time of Jesus in the Gospels?

Pharisees
The Pharisees were one of the major religious groups of Judaism who feature in the Gospels. Their name means the ‘separated ones’ and this describes the way that they maintained their faithfulness to the Scriptures and the traditions of Judaism in the face of the push to be absorbed into the culture of the Greco-Roman world. They were religious reformers who were more closely associated with the synagogue than the Temple, and were largely based in the rural areas. It is for this reason that they feature in the Gospels during the Galilean ministry of Jesus rather than his ministry in Jerusalem. While the Pharisees often feature in the Gospels as opponents of Jesus their disagreements with him should not obscure the fact that Jesus shared many values with them, that he dined in their houses (Luke 7:36) and it was the Pharisees who warned Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him (Luke 13:31).

[Sat the time of Jesus there were many Jewish groups with varied political and religious points of view.]

Sadducees
The Sadducees (Zadokites) formed much of the ruling elite of the people of Israel in the time of Jesus. It was from among them that the High Priest was chosen and, unlike the Pharisees, their power base was in Jerusalem with a specific focus on the Temple. During Jesus’ time the High Priests were appointed by the Romans. The Sadducees feature in the Gospels because of their opposition to Jesus and their lack of belief in the resurrection (Matthew 22:23).

DID YOU KNOW?
In Ancient Rome there were different classes of citizens. Full Roman citizens were called Cives Romani, lower levels were called Latini, Socii, Provinciales, and Peregrini. One of the ways that the Roman Empire encouraged people from the provinces to remain loyal was by granting them lower levels of citizenship. St Paul was a Roman citizen and probably fitted into this category (Acts 21:39).
Zealots

Masada, located beside the Dead Sea, was the last Zealot stronghold to fall to the legions in the revolt against Rome.

The Zealots were also known as “Sicarii” on account of the knives they used, which they were able to hide in their clothing. They resisted Roman rule and assassinated those known to be sympathisers with Rome. They would strike their victim and then escape by blending into the crowd.

Josephus described them as the “fourth Jewish philosophy” founded by Judas the Galilean in 6 CE. The term is used loosely to cover a number of groups who resisted Roman rule. One of Jesus’ disciples was known by the name Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15).

DID YOU KNOW?

The first Dead Sea scrolls were found by a young Bedouin shepherd boy in 1947 who was searching for a lost goat. He entered into a cave at Khirbet Qumran and found clay jars that had preserved these hidden scrolls and manuscripts for almost 2000 years. Over the next nine years they found pieces of over 850 separate scrolls in 11 caves.

Essenes

On the edge of the Dead Sea at Qumran, another group known as the Essenes established themselves. They were dissatisfied with the political and religious situation in Palestine. They were a group of religious reformers and they believed that the High Priest and the worship in the Temple in Jerusalem were not valid because the High Priest was appointed by Roman authorities. Their response was to move down by the Dead Sea and wait until the time that there would be a great battle between the forces of good and evil, after which they would return to begin true worship. They were gathered around a figure called the Teacher of Righteousness and their thoughts, teachings and translations of the Old Testament were found hidden in caves only last century. The writings from this group are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Matthew 22:17–22 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

tax, lawful, hypocrites, truth

Matthew 22:21

Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
Gospel of Mark

Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and the first of the four Gospels to be written. It starts with the words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” in Mark 1:1. These words go right to heart of Mark’s message – it is good news and it is about Jesus who is not only the Messiah, but the Son of God too. This Gospel was written for a group of Christians who had been persecuted and had already suffered for the sake of the Gospel message.

A new world

Mark writes the Gospel to encourage them not to lose heart, knowing that Jesus had suffered like them. He knew what it was like to be excluded and rejected, just as they were. What makes the message of Jesus such good news is that God was doing a remarkable thing in making a new world where lepers could now find a place to belong, where cripples were healed and people with withered and deformed hands could now be allowed in the synagogue. Jesus made it very clear that he had come for those who needed him in Mark 2:17:

Mark writes the Gospel to encourage them not to lose heart knowing that Jesus had suffered like them.

His message of hope was incredibly successful, so much that after healing the leper he had to stay outside the city. But now people came to him – he had already started to turn the world upside down! It was not long before his message of hope and forgiveness was challenged by the religious teachers of Israel. It is important to know that those who opposed Jesus were not evil people, they just couldn’t understand that God was doing a new thing, something completely unexpected for them.

DID YOU KNOW?

Leprosy is a disfiguring disease that begins by affecting the skin and nervous system. In biblical times lepers were excluded and shunned because the disease was seen to be highly contagious. Hansen’s disease is the name for leprosy today. In Jesus’ time people who suffered from other skin diseases were also called lepers.
The Son of Man

How unexpected Jesus’ words and deeds actually were becomes clear in the second half of the Gospel. This is when Jesus starts to let the disciples know that he must go to Jerusalem in order to suffer, die and then rise on the third day.

They like the idea of him being the promised king (Messiah), but they are not so keen on the road that Jesus has to travel. In Mark 8–10, Jesus will instruct the disciples three times that he is going to suffer, die and rise, and three times the disciples don’t understand his teaching about the nature of the Kingdom which Jesus unpacks for them in different ways: you need to lose your life to gain it, that power is going to be seen in suffering, that if you want to be rich you must sell all that you have and follow Jesus, that the last will be first and the first will be last. By the end of chapter 10 he makes it clear that the Son of Man has come to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

One of the amazing things about Mark’s Gospel is what happens after the women meet the angel who tells them that Jesus is risen. They run away afraid (Mark 15:6).
Gospel of Matthew

Each Gospel is written for a particular community, and has its own special flavour. Matthew’s Gospel is written for a community that is in a time of transition and change. Some fifty years have passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Matthew’s community want to be faithful to their Jewish heritage and, at the same time, bring the message of Jesus to all people without demanding that they follow all the requirements of the Jewish law.

One of the keys to unlocking this Gospel is found in this saying of Jesus in Matthew 9:17: “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

Matthew encourages the community to hold on to both the new and the old and preserve them both. Matthew holds on to the old by making sure that the reader understands just how Jewish Jesus really is.

Jesus teaches the attitudes and behaviour that are expected of disciples.

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them, saying:

Matthew 25:46

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

IN YOUR WORDS
Read Matthew 26:43–46 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

punishment kingdom justice stranger

DID YOU KNOW?
The scribes were an important group of people both religiously and in daily life. They wrote, preserved and studied the Scriptures and this made them experts on religious matters. They also used to write and copy contracts and other documents.
A new world

The first verse in Matthew makes this clear by introducing Jesus as “the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 presents Jesus as the new Moses who will teach us in the ways of the Kingdom of God. Like Pope Francis’ letter on the Joy of The Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches the attitudes and behaviour that is expected of disciples.

As Jewish as Matthew’s Gospel is, it is surprisingly open to the nations who are not Jewish – known as the Gentiles. Although the genealogy of Jesus is Jewish, the Gospel highlights Gentile women like Ruth in Matthew 1:5, and when Jesus begins his ministry it is in Galilee of the Gentiles (Matthew 4:15). While the disciples are first sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel in Matthew 10:6, by the conclusion of the Gospel Jesus commands his disciples to preach the Gospel message to all nations (Matthew 28:19–20).

Matthew reminds the community that they are never alone and that they should never lose heart. At the beginning of the Gospel in Matthew 1:23 Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means “God-with-us”. As the Gospel concludes in Matthew 28:20, Jesus promises to be with us till the end of the age. Matthew’s Gospel is both encouraging and challenging, and knowing that Jesus is with us makes all the difference.

Matthew 28:19–20

19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Matthew 28:16–20 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

command age commission ministry

DID YOU KNOW?

Both Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38 provide the reader with a genealogy of Jesus showing how he fits into God’s saving story for the people of Israel and the whole of humanity. Matthew emphasises the Jewishness of Jesus as son of Abraham and son of King David. Luke also notes that Jesus was of the line of David but shifts our focus to see that since he is the son of Adam he has come for all people.
Gospel of Luke

Like Matthew, Luke wrote some fifty years after the death of Jesus, probably to a community of urban Christians in modern Turkey. The first verses of this Gospel give us some important clues as to how to interpret it.

The first is that Luke was not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus’ life. The second is that while he was not an eyewitness, he had done his research about Jesus from those who were. The third is that he is concerned to show that what had come to pass in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and then the spread of the message of Jesus from Jerusalem all the way to Rome, was all part of God’s saving plan.

Jesus began his ministry by teaching and healing.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

This text is like a summary of Jesus’ ministry in the rest of the Gospel, and the saying that follows about the prophet being rejected in his hometown that is a prophecy, not only about Jesus, but those who will preach his message.

DID YOU KNOW?

Becoming a Christian was sometimes a very dangerous choice to make. In the parable of The Sower (Mark 4:17) Jesus speaks of the reality of persecution, and in one of the Beatitudes also speaks of persecution (Matthew 5:10). In the face of these real dangers Jesus encourages the disciples “Do not fear those who can kill the body but not the soul.” (Matthew 10:28)
Luke’s two-volume work


Each Gospel has its own flavour and one of the characteristics of Luke that we notice is that of its compassion and concern for the outsider and the excluded. This is the only Gospel that has the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), or The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), or The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), or the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14).

It’s not just in Jesus’ stories that we will see this, but in his actions too when he lets his feet be washed in public by the woman who was a known sinner in Luke 7:36–50, or in praising the Samaritan leper who returned to say thank you after he had been healed (Luke 17:11–19). In this Gospel there is a place for everyone at the table and in the parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 10:15–24, it reminds us that in the Kingdom of God there is always room for one more.

Luke’s Gospel is the only Gospel that has the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the Greco-Roman world meals called symposia were opportunities for groups and associations to celebrate friendship but also moments for discussion and teaching. Meals such as the one in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50), or on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1–24), or the Last Supper (Luke 22:14–38) are all used as important moments for Jesus to teach us about what is expected of those who follow him.
The Gospel of John has a very different character and flavour to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Perhaps because the other Gospels had already preserved many of the sayings and deeds of Jesus, the author did not feel it was necessary to tell the story in the same way again. This gave them the freedom to paint a portrait of Jesus that is very poetic and symbolic.

This Gospel was written for a group of Christians who were now excluded from worship and membership in the synagogue late in the first century. Cut adrift, most likely against their will, they were forced to tell the story of Jesus in a new way. The almost otherworldly prologue of the Gospel of John 1:1–18 talks about the Word of God becoming flesh and coming to his own people, but not being accepted. This was a cause of great sadness for this community because the message they wanted to share is that God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son (John 3:16).

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Some memorable events in the life of Jesus are presented only in the Gospel of John. For example, only John recorded The Wedding Feast at Cana, The Woman at the Well, and The Raising of Lazarus (John 2:1–11, 4:1–42, 11:1–12:11). Some of the unique titles for Jesus are found there too, e.g. The Bread of Life (John 6:33), The Way, The Truth, and The Life (John 14:6), The Light of the World (John 8:12).
Jesus visits Jerusalem

One of the striking elements of the Gospel of John is that Jesus visits Jerusalem much more than in the other Gospels at the time of the major Jewish religious festivals. The reason for this is that for the Christians of John’s community Jesus himself has replaced the Jewish feasts of Passover, Booths (Sukkoth or Feast of Tabernacles), and the Dedication of the Temple.

They were excluded from the synagogue, but in Jesus they had everything they needed.

They had come to understand that they had more than before! Their way of passing on their understanding was by means of moments in the Gospel where Jesus declares himself to be the Bread of Life (John 6:35), the Light of the World (John 8:12), the Good Shepherd (John 10:2), the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6), and the True Vine (John 15:1).

truth
a fact that can be trusted

John 14:6
Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

IN YOUR WORDS
Read John 14:1–6 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.
way   prepare
dwelling  authentic

DID YOU KNOW?

In Jesus’ time there were three Jewish pilgrimage festivals when people were expected to come to Jerusalem. The Passover was held in early spring and celebrated the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Pentecost (Feast of Weeks) comes 50 days after Passover and honours the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Sukkoth (Feast of Booths) remembers the 40 years the people of Israel wandered in the desert and how God provided for them on their journey. It coincides with the harvest at the end of summer.
Lamb of God

John's Gospel begins with a prologue that sets the scene and the reader is informed that Jesus is the living word of God who comes dwell among us and He will be a cause of division, but those who accept him can become children of God. One of first things we hear about Jesus is that he is the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Later in the Gospel, Jesus dies at the time when the Passover lamb is sacrificed and sprinkled with hyssop. None of Jesus' bones are broken. Jesus will encounter rejection and be killed, but there is a deeper meaning and purpose because no one can take his life – he lays it down out of love of his own accord (John 10:18).

DID YOU KNOW?

Hyssop is a plant in the mint family that was used in biblical times for the ritual cleansing of people after they suffered from skin diseases and to clean homes from mould. When the people of Israel prepared for the first Passover hyssop was used when they marked their doorposts in the blood of the lamb (Exodus 12:22).

 JOHN 10:18

18 “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

IN YOUR WORDS

Read John 10:14-18 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible:

voluntarily command lay down

accord free will: without being asked
We are disciples by loving one another just as Jesus has loved us.

Lamb of God
Jesus' whole life is a living sign of God's love and the first half of the Gospel is often called the book of glory where different characters in the narrative wrestle with the deeds of Jesus and with his message. The second half of the Gospel is largely taken up with Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure and reminding them they will not be alone because the Spirit will be with them. He calls them to obey the most important command of all—that of proving we are disciples by loving one another just as Jesus has loved us (John 13:34; 15:12).

DID YOU KNOW?
The Golden Rule is found in at least 13 other major religions.
Do the Gospels describe what Jesus looked like?

In 2013 Instagram reported that people share 45 million photos a day on their site and have shared over 1.6 billion in total in the three years up to then. We are surrounded by images and see on average 2000 media images each day! It is almost impossible for us to imagine that Gospels say nothing about whether Jesus was short or tall, handsome or ugly, long-haired or balding. We simply don’t know! We can only guess why they didn’t leave any description for Christians of future generations like us.

After the resurrection of Jesus it may be that the early Christians felt that any description of Jesus in the time of his earthly ministry was not needed, or maybe even disrespectful. The resurrection made it clear that Jesus was the Son of God and that was more important than any other piece of information.

DID YOU KNOW?

In Luke 3:23 Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. The Gospels don’t tell us directly how long his ministry lasted though John’s Gospel speaks of Jesus going to Jerusalem at the time of Passover on three occasions (John 2:13; 6:4 and 11:55–57). On this basis our best guess was that his ministry lasted for three or so years and that he was 33 when he died.

Matthew 28:2

2 “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

[The resurrection made it clear that Jesus was the Son of God.]

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Matthew 28:2–7 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

heaven
sabbath
raised
angel
Stories of the Resurrection

The stories of Jesus after the resurrection are interesting, too, because Jesus could be recognised in familiar actions like breaking bread with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, or eating fish with his friends by the Sea of Galilee, or be known by the scars on his hands, feet and side. On the other hand, his disciples on the road to Emmaus didn’t recognise him, and Mary Magdalene thought he was a gardener! These experiences probably encouraged them to say nothing, especially since now Jesus was made known through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Shroud of Turin is found in Turin Cathedral and it has marks of a man who had been flogged, beaten, pierced in his side, feet and through one wrist (the other is hidden). While the Church has never officially claimed this is the shroud that Jesus was wrapped in after his death, there are many people who believe this to be the case. The shroud has been an object of veneration and close study for many years.

Jesus was made known through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John 20:27

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

IN YOUR WORDS

Read John 20:25–27 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

believe    doubt    distrust
recognise    evidence    markings
Why did Jesus speak in parables?

Most of us prefer learning by listening to stories rather than having to learn countless facts. Much of Jesus’ most remembered and loved teaching comes in the form of parables. The Hebrew word for parable is “mashal” and it can mean a story, a riddle, a simile, or a proverb. One of the most important things to remember about parables is that they make you think about familiar things in a new way.

The parables show us that Jesus was creative and challenging as he set out to get the disciples and the people of his time to see the world in a different way, to imagine what the world should be like – a world he called the Kingdom of God – where God was in charge and the number one rule was that of loving God and our neighbour.

The parables show us that Jesus was creative and challenging.

Luke 15:20
20 “So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

IN YOUR WORDS
Read Luke 15:11–32 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

property squandered worthy celebrate

DID YOU KNOW?
The Gospels preserve many of Jesus’ parables. The Gospel of Mark has ten parables. Most of these parables are also found in Matthew and Luke who also share other thirteen parables between them. Matthew has ten special parables including The Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45–46), and The Wedding Guest without a Wedding Garment (Matthew 22:1–14). Luke has eighteen parables that are unique such as The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).
The point of the parables

Many parables begin with Jesus saying “to what can I compare the Kingdom of God?” and the Kingdom might be described as being like a small mustard seed, or seed sown by a sower, or someone looking for precious pearls, or someone casting a net and having to sort out what the net drags in.

The point of some parables is pretty clear, like the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. When Jesus told the Jewish authorities the parable about the Wicked Tenants who killed the son of the landowner they knew that the parable was told about them and they got the point.

Some parables Jesus didn’t need to explain, other parables were like riddles that got the disciples thinking, and they had to ask Jesus what he meant by these tantalising riddles. Of course, that’s exactly what Jesus wanted!

Parables were like riddles that got the disciples thinking.

DID YOU KNOW?

While we think of parables as being short stories told by Jesus his parables also include proverbs and sayings. All of them are meant to make us stop, think, and see the world in new way from Jesus’ point of view. Many of Jesus’ parables leave the interpretation up to the reader. In the parable of The Prodigal Son the reader must provide the ending – Will the elder son go in and join the feast or not? (Luke 15:11–32).

tenant
a person who rents land or any property

Mark 12:9
9 What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Mark 12:1–12 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.

vineyard
inheritance
parable
destroy
Miracles

Not only did Jesus speak about the Kingdom of God coming among us, but his miracles were vibrant and startling reminders of the ways that the time of the reign of God had already begun. As Jesus himself said in Matthew 12:28, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”

There are many references to the miracles worked by Jesus. The Gospel of John calls them signs, and they range from casting out demons, healing lepers and raising the dead, to nature miracles like calming the storm on the lake, amazing catches of fish, or feeding the five thousand.

These miracles often provide a challenge for people today because they challenge the laws of nature and people can sometimes be skeptical that they have been overly exaggerated, or didn’t happen at all. One thing we can say is that Jesus’ opponents didn’t dispute that Jesus worked miracles. What they did argue about is where the power came from (Matthew 12:24).

DID YOU KNOW?

There are over 37 specific miracles of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. Many speak of Jesus’ power to heal, to cast out demons, and to command the forces of nature. There is only one miracle story that all the Gospels relate and that is the Feeding of the 5000 in Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17 and John 6:1–15.

Jesus’ miracles were vibrant and startling reminders of the ways that the time of the reign of God was indeed among us.

Matthew 12:24
28 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.’

IN YOUR WORDS

Read Matthew 12:22–32 then write your response using as many of the following words as possible.
cast
cured
divided
blasphemy
The gift of healing

Another thing we know about Jesus’ time is that Jesus was not alone in working miracles and that there are stories of rabbis and famous teachers and what might occur at the healing shrines like those of Asclepius (Greek god of healing).

We should consider the list of gifts that Paul speaks about in the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:28). One of these is the gift of healing that Paul knows that the community have seen for themselves worked in Jesus’ name. We know that after the resurrection of Jesus some of the stories of Jesus’ miracles might have grown in the telling, like fish that got away, or amazing acts of courage or sporting feats that people describe “You just had to be there!” That doesn’t mean that miracles didn’t happen or don’t have a historical basis. People in the ancient world were not fools and they were not simply convinced any more than we are. Where miracles are concerned, where there’s smoke there’s fire!

DID YOU KNOW?

It was only to be expected that after the resurrection of Jesus the early Christians told stories about Jesus that stressed his power in the time of his earthly ministry. They were now absolutely certain that he was the Son of God and had conquered death itself. A small example is in the Feeding of the 5000. In Mark, Luke and John, 5000 people were fed. In Matthew 14:21 the point is made that there were more people fed adding the phrase “besides women and children”.

1 Corinthians 12:8

8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit.
What can we say about the Resurrection?

This is a fascinating question, and the first thing to say is that if the early Christians hadn’t believed that Jesus was raised from the dead there would be no New Testament, there would have been no need to write anything at all!

The Gospel writers do not describe any of the details of the resurrection of Jesus. What they do describe is how the Risen Lord appeared to Mary Magdalene, the apostles, and other disciples who were convinced that it was the same Jesus who had been their Master and Teacher.

The traditions about what the Risen Jesus was like vary quite considerably. He still had the wounds in his hand and his side, and this indicates some consistency with his appearance before the Resurrection. On the other hand he is not recognised by his wounds by the disciples on the road to Emmaus, but by the familiar actions of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing bread at the table. One thing for sure is that these meetings convinced the first disciples to start again, going back to Galilee where it all began. They were absolutely certain that Jesus’ giving of his life was not in vain, and that God had done something absolutely amazing – death had been conquered by love, and that meant that what Jesus had said before was now going to be preserved for all time, knowing that nothing could separate us from the love of God.

**The first disciples were certain that Jesus’ giving of his life was not in vain, and that God had done something absolutely amazing.**

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**DID YOU KNOW?**

We can often think that there were very few Christians who had encountered the Risen Lord but St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8 mentions that he appeared to Peter, then the Twelve, then 500 others before appearing to James and finally, Paul himself.