

Four Gospels (SERIES)

Series (Parts 1 to 3). Holy Trinity Twickenham, February 2008.

Part 1: Mark and Luke (Acts 1:1-7, Luke 1:1-4).

Here are some interesting questions for you:

- Why are there four gospels in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?
- How are the four gospels different from each other?
- When were they written, and who were they written for?
- Who were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John anyway?
- Were the four gospels randomly chosen to go into the Bible, centuries later, from among a huge pool of alternative gospels?

Well, if you've ever wondered about any of those questions, you're going to enjoy our new series of talks called Four Gospels. And if you've never stopped to wonder about any of those questions, I promise you you're going to find it equally fascinating!

We're taking three weeks and by the end I hope we'll have answered all these questions and a whole lot more besides. So let's start off with a few basic facts. The Old Testament tells the history of the people of Israel and their relationship with God. The New Testament tells about the coming of Jesus and the importance of Jesus. The very first section of the New Testament is four mini-biographies of Jesus.

Now, as recently as 20 years ago that would have been a controversial statement. Historians in the past would have said the gospels aren't actually biographies at all. They don't give a full picture of Jesus's life: they virtually ignore the whole period from when Jesus was a baby to when he was about 30 years old. And then there's a huge amount just about his death. What kind of biography is that?

Except that then in 1992 an expert in classical history and literature compared the 4 Gospels with biographies from ancient Greece and Rome, instead of comparing them to biographies today. And lo and behold: he found that classical biographies follow exactly the pattern you see in the Gospels. They ignore all the years of the person's childhood, they have a big focus on the person's most important words and actions, and then a huge focus on how they died. Because the assumption was the manner of somebody's death said a lot about them. So the 4 gospels are good examples of ancient biography.

Historians say the first Gospel to be written was the gospel of Mark. Now, bear in mind the most likely date for the crucifixion of Jesus was AD 33. We reckon Mark's Gospel was written between 50 and 75 AD. In other words, something like 15 to 40 years after the events the gospel records, well within the lifetimes of most of the people who met Jesus.

All the evidence shows that Mark's gospel was based on the first-hand reminiscences by the Apostle Peter. The scenario was something like this. Mark was a young Jewish man who was a companion and assistant to Peter. Peter was travelling round the Jewish Christian communities of the Roman Empire at the same time as Paul was going to the non-Jewish communities. Peter ended up in Rome, and Mark was probably there as his interpreter, translating Peter's accounts of his adventures into Latin. And as Mark sat listening to Peter's stories, he started to write them down.

In fact, there's evidence that Mark only started distributing his biography of Jesus after Peter had died. The reason is that Mark's gospel has lots of embarrassing details about Peter that would have shown Peter in a bad light (like Peter denying Jesus, and the times when Peter's shown up as stupid or slow). In fact, all the negative references to Peter are evidence that the gospel is historically accurate. Peter was a big hero of the early church,

and those negative details would only have been included if they really happened.

The 4 gospels are all slightly different from each other. But the biggest difference is between Matthew Mark and Luke on the one hand, and John on the other hand. Matthew Mark and Luke include a lot of the same stories, told in slightly different ways. But then when you read John, you realize it's quite different from the others. There are lots of stories that aren't in the other gospels, and the style's quite different. We'll say a bit more about John in a fortnight's time. Today we're looking at Mark and Luke.

Mark's the earliest gospel. It's also the shortest. Mark says nothing at all about the birth of Jesus, no Christmas story at all. He launches straight in with stories about Jesus aged about 30. He shows Jesus as a man of action, always involved in conflict and battling against the forces of evil. In Mark's gospel Jesus comes across as very human, which is probably what you'd expect, because it's the personal accounts of Peter, who was Jesus's friend and follower.

The stories are very earthy: Jesus showing his fingers in a deaf man's ears, Jesus spitting in the mud to make paste. So if you read Mark, you'll find the story of Jesus written in a very short space, it moves forward at a breathless pace, and it presents Jesus as a kind of action hero, gritty and confrontational.

Now, we reckon the gospel of Luke was written a bit later than Mark: probably in the 70s AD or a bit later. In other words, 40 to 50 years after the events it describes. Who was Luke? This is interesting: Luke was a doctor. An actual medical doctor. And Luke travelled around with Paul on his journeys around the Mediterranean.

Luke seems to have had a few sources for his gospel: first, he actually had a copy of Mark's gospel. We know that because whole sections of Mark's gospel appear almost word-for word in Luke, or slightly adjusted. Luke had also compiled his own eye-witness accounts of the life of Jesus from other people, and he had stories that other people had copied down, and he included those as well. So Luke's gospel is longer than Mark's.

Incidentally, Luke also wrote the book of Acts, which tells the story of the early church. So Luke's gospel is just part one of a two-part series. In fact, the two are meant to be read as a single volume. It's a continuation of the same story.

But Luke was a different person from Mark, and he had a very different audience. Remember, Luke was going around with Paul. And Paul's big focus was non-Jews. Taking the message out to the non-Jewish world that the Jesus was the Messiah for all people everywhere. Including even the most unlikely of people. And that explains the main distinctives of Luke's gospel.

Luke focuses all the time on how Jesus reaches out to outsiders: corrupt tax officials, prostitutes, and people with leprosy. He shows Jesus mixing with poor people and social outcasts. He recounts Jesus's story about the good Samaritan, because the Samaritans were the butt of the racial jokes of the day. Luke also shows Jesus's positive attitude towards women, in a society that was institutionally sexist. Women weren't taught to read or allowed testify in court. Luke thinks it's important to tell us about Jesus spending time with Martha and Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and giving other women dignity and attention. There's also a big focus on Jesus's mother Mary.

And Luke also focuses on the healings of Jesus, which you might expect, given that Luke was a doctor! In fact, Luke's probably the most popular gospel today, because it presents a Jesus who's warm and caring, getting alongside ordinary people, especially people on the margins.

So that's just a little bit about Mark and Luke. And next week we're going to find out a bit more about Matthew, and what's different about his account of the life of Jesus. But the important thing is this. The gospels of Mark and Luke were never written to gather dust on people's shelves. They were written by men who travelled around the ancient world, and witnessed for themselves the most dramatic events in human history, or spoke to the people who did. These were people who were so excited at what they were seeing that they were keen write it down for future generations. People like you and me.

Sometimes people ask me: How should I start reading the Bible? Do I just start at the beginning and read to the end? The answer is no. Start with one of the gospels. Read it at one sitting, or over a few days, as if you were reading a crime novel. The gospels are still incredibly readable and exciting. And allow yourself to be caught up in the excitement of the people who saw with their own eyes the most remarkable events in history.

Part 2: Matthew (Jeremiah 23:1-8, Matthew 1:1-6)

What are the least read bits of the Bible? Well, I'd suggest the least read bits of the Bible are the genealogies. The great long lists of names you get in various places. Even people who're avid readers of the Bible tend to skip over the places where you get a whole page of names: 'Isaac was the father of Jacob, Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah,' and so on.

So we find it hard to imagine there might be an important reason why these genealogies are there at all. But when we get to the Gospel of Matthew, it turns out there's a really important reason why Matthew starts his Gospel with 17 verses of names.

And in a moment I'll tell you what the reason is! We've come to Part 2 of our series Four Gospels, where we're looking at the four mini-biographies of Jesus that start the New Testament: Matthew Mark Luke and John. We've said the Gospels are a good example of ancient biography, written in the same style as other biographies of ancient heroes: where their childhood is virtually ignored, there's a lot about their great words and deeds, and a lot about the manner of their death.

Last week we said Mark was probably the first to be written. That it was written soon after the events it describes, based on the reminiscences of the Apostle Peter. We said Mark is the shortest gospel, and the Jesus it portrays is hard-hitting and confrontational.

We said Luke is similar to Mark, but it's written with a different audience in mind. It's written for a gentile audience: in other words, non-Jews. So it stresses the universality of the Gospel: how Jesus takes his message to everybody, especially people marginalised in Jewish culture of the day.

In a moment, we're going to look at Matthew and what's distinctive about his gospel. But before we do that, I want to take a moment to look at an argument some people have against the four gospels in the Bible.

It's an argument that's been doing the rounds for a long time. But it's been recently revived in a couple of ways. One is Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, where it's an important part of the story. The other is the rise of the Internet. Where all kinds of conspiracy theories get a hearing, even if they're potty. The Internet isn't edited in the way a scholarly book is edited. Any half-baked ideas can be put out there and if people don't know much about history, these half-baked ideas sound convincing.

The argument of the Da Vinci Code and the potty Internet writers goes like this. People only decided which gospels should go into the Bible hundreds of years after they were written. A committee of powerful churchmen sat down in the 4th century and decided arbitrarily which gospels they wanted in the Bible. They had a big pool of gospels, including Matthew Mark Luke and John, but also the so-called Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Mary, and lots of others.

And they simply chose the gospels that reflected their own views, and bolstered their own power. Any gospels that gave support to alternative versions of Christianity were suppressed and left out of the New Testament.

Now, if you don't know any history, that sounds plausible. The trouble is, it's not what happened. The fact is that the whole church of the early church recognised the importance of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John right from the start. Why? Because all four were close to the events they record, they were based on eye-witness accounts of the Apostles and the other people who saw the events unfolding. We talked last week about how Mark was the travelling companion of the Apostle Peter, and Mark's gospel was based on the reminiscences of Peter himself.

On the other hand, these other so-called 'gospels' date from a much later period. The Gospels of Thomas, Judas, Peter and Mary exist, but they're from the second century. Long after the events they claim to describe. And they reflect the thought-patterns of a second-century movement called Gnosticism, which is all about hidden, secret, mystical knowledge. It's more like a kind of mystical pagan religion, but using characters from the New Testament to give it a bit of credibility. The best known of these so-called alternative gospels is the Gospel of Thomas, and there's clear historical evidence that it was written between 170 and 200 AD, long after the events of the gospels.

The other thing that's slightly odd is that the Da Vinci Code, and the potty Internet writers, claim these alternative gospels show a kind of early feminism. And that this was seen as a threat to the power structures of the church, so it was suppressed. It's an odd argument because precisely the reverse is true.

In the gospel of Thomas, Jesus is presented as saying that Mary will only find salvation if she becomes a man, and that Jesus will guide her on a mystical path to becoming male, 'because every female who becomes male will enter the kingdom of heaven'. This is weird, a million miles from the the historical Jesus and the real gospels.

We said last week how Luke repeatedly shows Jesus affirming women. He lets them sit at his feet in the position of disciples (in a society where women weren't allowed to do that). Women are the first witnesses of the resurrection (in a society where the testimony of a woman wasn't allowed in court). And so on.

So these conspiracy theories about the gospels are simply wrong. The four gospels in the Bible are there for a good reason. They were written very close to the events they describe, within a generation, and they were based on eyewitness testimony. These other so-called gospels are from a much later date. And they're based on loopy ideas that can't possibly go back to the historical Jesus. In other words Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are a window into what happened in a way that these other dodgy dossiers could never be.

So finally, to Matthew. Who was he? Matthew was a Jewish tax collector, who became one of Jesus's first disciples. And it was the unanimous view of the early church that the gospel was written by that Matthew. It was written in the 70s or 80s AD, about the same time as Luke. And Matthew includes most of the same stories and quotes you find in Mark and Luke.

But Matthew has a different audience in view. Especially different from Luke. Remember: Luke is written for gentiles, non-Jews. To show Jesus opening up the kingdom of God to all people, especially the most marginalised people. But Matthew is writing explicitly to convince his own people, Jewish people, that Jesus really was the Jewish

Messiah. So it's by far the most Jewish of the gospels. Here are three ways you can tell:

1. Matthew starts with that long *genealogy* of names. Jewish people were expecting a Messiah of the house of the great King David, a 'Son of David'. So Matthew shows how Jesus is descended from David, on his father's side. And for good measure he shows how he's actually descended from Abraham Isaac and Jacob, the early founders of the nation.
2. Matthew keeps *quoting* passages from the Old Testament prophets and Psalms, and he keeps making links with OT themes. Just one example. After one of Jesus's healings Matthew says: 'This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah,'

3. Matthew shows how Jesus is like another *Moses*. Remember, Moses in the OT went up Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments from God. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus goes up a hill in Galilee and gives what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus explicitly takes the OT law, and changes it, deepens it and fulfils it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says time after time: 'You heard it was said, (in other words, in the OT law it was said), But now I tell you,' Jesus is bringing in a new covenant, a new testament between God and his people.

So where does all that leave us? Well, at a practical level, it means you and me will probably find Luke more accessible than Matthew! A lot of the references in Matthew presuppose an understanding of the Jewish background of Jesus in a way that Luke doesn't.

But the message of Matthew is important, because he gives the other side of the same coin given by Luke. Luke shows how Jesus reaches out to everybody, whether you're Jew or Greek, male or female, sick or healthy. While Matthew's gospel is glue that holds together the Old and New Testaments, showing who Jesus really is, against his Jewish background. He's the true Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David, opening up a whole new Covenant between God and his people, giving a whole new set of guidance about how to live.

Matthew and Luke are both true. Jesus really is the Messiah, and he is the Saviour of the gentiles too. But each of these guys is writing for a different audience, so each of them highlights those aspects of Jesus's life and teaching that will connect with their own readership.

Matthew might not end up as your favourite gospel, but it's vital in helping us understand the full dimension of who Jesus really is, and why he's so important. And the challenge to each of us is to rediscover Jesus for ourselves, by looking through the window of the Gospels, written by people who'd seen what a difference Jesus had made in the lives of those who met him.

Part 3: John (Genesis 1:1-6, John 1:1-14)

We've reached the third and final part of our series called Four Gospels, where we've been looking at the four mini-biographies of Jesus that start the New Testament of the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

When we started the series a couple of weeks ago, I said the big divide when you look at the gospels is between Matthew Mark and Luke on one side, and John on the other side. John's gospel feels really quite different from the others. And in a moment, we're going to find out what sort of differences there are.

But first, the obvious question. Who was the John who wrote John's Gospel? Well, the Gospel itself says it was written by John the disciple of Jesus. Jesus's followers included two sets of brothers, including James and John. And the unanimous view of the early church was that this John really did write the gospel of John.

We reckon it was the last of the gospels to be written. We don't have an exact date, but most experts say it was towards the end of the first century AD, when John would have been an old man.

So what about those differences with the other gospels? We said earlier in the series that Matthew Mark and Luke have the same basic shape, and they include the same basic set of stories and sayings of Jesus. There are some differences between the three of them. Mark is short and punchy, with lots of conflict – good versus evil conflict. Matthew is written explicitly for Jewish people, to convince them that Jesus really was the Jewish

Messiah. And Luke was written explicitly for non-Jews to persuade them about the universal significance of Jesus.

But despite the differences, the shape of the gospels is basically the same. But then you read John, and you find a completely different approach:

- Matthew Mark and Luke show Jesus *teaching in parables* - little stories that use everyday illustrations like coins and trees and house-building. But John doesn't have any of Jesus's famous parables at all. Instead, you see Jesus having long conversations with particular individuals. And these are individuals who don't even appear in the other gospels.

So for example, the Christian idea of 'new birth' comes from a long conversation Jesus has with a Jewish leader called Nicodemus, who was a member of the ruling council. And later Jesus has a long conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well.

- Matthew Mark and Luke show Jesus *healing* lots of people (Luke has 15 healing stories). But John's gospel only records 3 healings. And oddly enough, these three are only recorded by John - they're simply not there in the other gospels.
- In Matthew Mark and Luke, Jesus's main theme is the 'Kingdom of God'. In other words, the reign of God, or the rule of God in human affairs, here and now. But in John's gospel, you don't get that. What you see is Jesus making huge *claims about himself*. In fact, one of the key elements of John's gospel is a series of seven sayings where Jesus uses the phrase 'I am'. 'I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the gate for the sheep, the resurrection and the life, the true vine, the way the truth and the life'.

Now why's that so important? Every time Jesus uses that phrase 'I am', he's deliberately echoing the way God speaks about himself. God is talking to Moses in the book of Exodus (3:14), and he describes himself as the great 'I am'. Jesus is making a huge claim about his own importance.

- Matthew Mark and Luke basically dive in with the story of Jesus's life. It's true, Matthew gives a big genealogy of names first, and the others don't, but they all still tell the same story in a similar way. John's gospel starts in quite a different way (READ John 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word,'). It's as if John has stepped back from the events of Jesus's life and he gives a poetic meditation on the *meaning* of Jesus. He's the Word of God, God's self-expression in the world.

The other thing to mention here is that the beginning of John's gospel deliberately echoes the opening words of Genesis: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. It's as if John is linking the importance of the coming of Jesus with the creation of the universe itself. In fact, John even says that this 'Word of God' was actually there at the creation. And that same Word is now being born on earth in the person of Jesus.

These are huge, epic claims about Jesus.

- In the other gospels, Jesus talks about God as a *Father* (as in the start of the Lord's prayer). But John shows Jesus saying much much more about his own relationship to the Father. In John's gospel, Jesus says he was sent by the Father, and that he's the way to the Father. And most shocking of all he says: 'I and the Father are one'. In other words, he says quite clearly that he's equal to God. And incidentally, that would later become the basis for the idea that God is a Trinity, of Father Son and Holy Spirit.

So, what do we make of all these differences? Well, in the past people used to say: 'well, it's obvious isn't it? Matthew Mark and Luke reflect the real Jesus. And John's gospel is a kind of pious reflection on Jesus written in later years, long after the events he describes. So if you want to get to the real Jesus, read Matthew Mark or Luke. You won't get much history from John. John is more of a poetic meditation.'

But more recently, research has been finding that the details of John's gospels are historically accurate. Just one example. It wasn't that long ago that archaeologists found the site of the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2). And the excavations showed it had five porticoes, a kind of roof supported by columns, exactly as it's described in the Gospels.

Before that, historians just assumed John had been making it up, inventing his own extra stories about Jesus. It's becoming clear that John actually gives an incredibly accurate picture of Jerusalem before AD70, when it was destroyed by the Romans. So it looks as if John's Gospel is just as reliable historically, it just goes back to different stories about Jesus, and different eye-witnesses. It's not better or worse, just different.

But the most important thing about John's gospel is the reason why John wrote it. He actually tells us, towards the end of the book (20: 30, 31): 'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name'.

If you've never read one of the gospels, why not try reading one through, from start to finish, in the next week or two? Just read it through, like reading a novel.

As many people down the centuries have found, the result can be much more than finding out about an intriguing figure from history. It can mean a life-changing encounter with the same Jesus who transformed the lives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all those years ago.