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Foreword

Welcome to this special edition of the gospels. These four accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ represent the heart of the Christian story – a story which describes the gift of new life, offered to each one of us.

Through the lenses of these four accounts, we perceive a rich and compelling depiction of Jesus. We see him in the vulnerability of a baby, the inquisitiveness of a child, the gentleness of a healer, the force of a prophet, the determination of an activist and the humility of a servant. We encounter Jesus – fully God, fully man.

The words of these gospels echo through the centuries precisely because they speak afresh in every generation. Ever ancient, ever new, this story of transformation invites us to be transformed and gradually conformed to the likeness of the one who was the gift to others. Not dead words on a page, but a living message addressed to each of us personally.

I invite you now to prayerfully discover again the gift of Christ through this sacred book. Allow yourself to be challenged and persuaded. Permit yourself to be refreshed and surprised.

My prayer for you is that in reading these accounts, you will once again discover the joy of the gospel, and – renewed in your faith – you will live that gospel message aloud in the world around you as a gift to all those whom you encounter.

The Rt Revd Peter M Brignall
Bishop of Wrexham



Beginning to Read the Gospels

- ▶ *The Bible is the most read book in the history of the world.*
- ▶ *It has influenced the lives of people as diverse as Kaká and Rembrandt, Mumford & Sons and Mother Teresa, Rihanna and Winston Churchill.*
- ▶ *It has inspired revolutions of change and is at the heart of the way our own society works.*

Yet, for many of us, it's a challenge to get to grips with the scriptures. So to make it easier, we offer these four gospels, taken from the New Testament, with some helpful information about their background and meaning. Through these gospels we hope you will discover more about the person of Christ, who is at the centre of our faith, and who is always with us on our own journey through life.

What is a 'gospel'?

'Gospel' usually refers to an account of the life of Jesus that was written to encourage people to believe in him and to follow his way of life. The original Greek word for gospel is *evangelion*, which means 'good news' (gospel comes from 'godspel', an Old English word for that phrase).

There are four gospels in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three are called the synoptic gospels because they include many of the same stories about Jesus, often in a similar sequence and with similar words. The term *synoptic* comes from the Greek meaning 'seeing all together'. They are different from John whose content is distinct – he misses out details about Jesus' life that are present in the other three gospels and includes information that is not in the other gospels.

The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Like each book of the Bible, **the four gospels are divided into chapters, and each chapter is divided into verses.** These verses and chapters aren't found in the original manuscripts, but Christians have found it helpful to use this system so that they don't get lost in all the words.

As there are four gospels it is easier to start by reading smaller chunks rather than by trying to read all four in one stretch. If it helps you, start with Mark first unless you like dipping in and out of all four. If you would like to read a whole gospel in one go you will find it has a power and intensity of its own. Don't forget that because they were written 2,000 years ago some of the language might sound strange or not very clear. If you have questions, try asking your priest, family or friends. Questions can make the gospels come alive; talking about the texts will help you deepen your understanding and faith as well as challenge you to explore your ideas and share them with others.

Some people like to say a short prayer before they read the gospels, asking the Holy Spirit to guide them.

Lord,

We ask you to prepare us as we read the gospels.

Open our hearts and minds to your great mysteries and truths.

May your Holy Spirit guide us as we seek to know and love you more deeply.

Amen.

Others like to read a chosen passage out loud (as we hear things differently when spoken, while others like to take notes, or underline different words or passages. Do whatever works for you. There's no right or wrong way.



Four Gospels, One Christ

Why are there four gospels rather than just the one?

Imagine you are talking about someone who isn't here, you may be thinking of a friend or someone in your family. You will have an idea of what they're like and how you see them. Other people may have a different idea of the same person from a different perspective. All of you will be talking about the same person but bringing a range of memories about who they are, what they have said to you and the kind of life they lead. The four gospels are a bit like this. They are each describing the same person – Jesus Christ, but from a different angle. Although there is much overlap in the synoptic gospels, they have their differences and together with John, form a rich and dynamic picture of Jesus, the Son of God – of his life, death and resurrection.

Here are some of the interesting differences and symbols found in the gospels.

Traditionally there have been four symbols attributed to the four gospel writers and which you can see in many paintings, manuscripts, architecture and stained glass windows in churches.

Matthew – a man, Mark – a lion, Luke – an ox, John – an eagle.

These four symbols are taken from references in two places of the Bible:

The Old Testament book, Ezekiel 1:10-11a *'As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above.'*

The New Testament book, Revelation 4:7-8a *'the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings.'*

The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John



Matthew – a man

Matthew's symbol is a man because his gospel represents humanity and is focused on the humanity of Jesus. He begins his gospel with a list all of Jesus' ancestors and Jesus' humility is mentioned throughout the book.



Mark – a lion

Mark's symbol is a lion because his gospel represents leadership and royalty (these qualities are traditionally associated with the lion). Jesus Christ perfectly models real leadership and royalty.



Luke – an ox

Luke's symbol is an ox because the ox was used in sacrifices in the Temple and there is a sacrifice being offered at the beginning of his gospel. The ox is seen as a reminder of the priestly character of Jesus and of his sacrificial death for the sins of all the world.



John – an eagle

John's symbol is an eagle because unlike the three synoptic gospels it begins with a deep meditation upon the meaning of the fact of Christ, as if looking at Christ from above rather than from the ground while he is with his followers. John also includes a description of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit making the symbol of a winged or flying eagle even more powerful.



These symbols of the gospel writers show their connection to the divine. They are messengers of God so are all portrayed with wings and are bringers of the 'good news'.



Going Deeper into Scripture

To appreciate the gospels, it can really help to discover where they fall within the whole story of the Bible.

One way to understand this bigger story is:

- 1** God created human beings and the wider creation, and loved us completely.

Genesis, Psalms and the beginning of John's Gospel describe this.
- 2** Humanity chose to turn away from God, trying to make ourselves like mini-gods and creating all sorts of damage (sin) along the way.

Genesis, Psalms and the letter to the Romans describe this, although much of the Old Testament is about humanity choosing to turn away from God.
- 3** God initiated a rescue plan for humanity, making a series of promises or agreements with his people.

Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and much of the Old Testament is about these 'Covenant' promises.
- 4** Humanity for their part, asked questions about purpose, integrity, wisdom, love and beauty to try to understand God and the world around them.

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.



5

To fulfil his rescue plan, God himself came to be with humanity, in the mystery of Jesus – fully human and fully divine.

The gospels.

6

By coming to be with us, God invited humanity to be with him – to live a new, Spirit-filled life as a child of God.

The Acts of the Apostles.

7

We live this life as a child of God as part of a wider family – the Church – which helps us to live wisely and to receive moments of special grace (sacraments) pointed to by the Scriptures.

The New Testament Letters.

8

We look forward to the day when we will meet Jesus face to face; a vision of a world where the pain and suffering caused by humanity's wrongdoing will be ultimately banished.

Revelation.



The Gospel According to Matthew

The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah

1 An account of the genealogy^a of Jesus the Messiah,^b the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph,^c ⁸and Asaph^c the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos,^d and Amos^d the father of Josiah, ¹¹and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹²And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴and Azor the father of Zadok, and

a Or *birth* b Or *Jesus Christ* c Other ancient authorities read *Asa* d Other ancient authorities read *Amon*

Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud,¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob,¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.^e

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah,^e fourteen generations.

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^f took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;^g and he named him Jesus.

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^h from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,ⁱ and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and

e Or *the Christ* f Or *Jesus Christ* g Other ancient authorities read *her firstborn son*
h Or *astrologers*; Gk *magi* i Or *in the East*

all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^j was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^k my people Israel." '

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^l and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^m until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,ⁿ they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Escape to Egypt

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴Then Joseph^o got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,^p he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and

j Or *the Christ* k Or *rule* l Or *astrologers*; Gk *magi* m Or *in the East* n Gk *saw the star*
o Gk *he* p Or *astrologers*; Gk *magi*

around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.^p ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ ‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no
more.’

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ ²¹Then Joseph^q got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’^r ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.”’

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you

p Or *astrologers*; Gk *magi* q Gk *he* r Or *is at hand*

to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹‘I baptize you with^s water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with^s the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved,^t with whom I am well pleased.’

The Temptation of Jesus

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ ⁴But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of
God.”’

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,
and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

⁷Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee

¹²Now when Jesus^u heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the
Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of
death
light has dawned.’

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’^v

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ ²⁰Immediately

^u Gk *he* ^v Or *is at hand*