The world prepared for Jesus

Four and a half centuries elapsed from the closing words of the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, to Jesus's birth. They're often called 'the silent years'. But they weren't silent. God still spoke to His people through His Scriptures. And God was active in history, as He had always been. He was setting the stage of history for the coming of His Son. Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, prepares us for His coming: “... the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” (Malachi 3.1).

So after long centuries, but at precisely the right moment (see Galatians 4.4), the long awaited Messiah was born. And "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1.14) – an event more momentous than the very creation of the Universe itself.

The world of Jesus’s day

Three great cultures - Hebrew, Greek and Roman - prepared the world stage for Jesus's coming.

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**Hebrew**

The magnificent Temple sustained the sacrificial worship as laid down in the Scriptures. In the Temple and in the local synagogues, Jews gathered to worship God and study His word. The Scriptures moulded their thinking, their identity and their aspirations.

**Greek**

Alexander didn’t live long, but his legacy - Greek language and culture - continued under the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties that successively dominated Judea.

Greek as well as Latin was spoken across the eastern Roman Empire, and even in Rome. The whole New Testament was written in Greek, not Latin.

Greek culture (called ‘Hellenism’), had a profound impact on the Mediterranean world and the Near East. For the Jews, Hellenism competed with the Scriptures to shape their thinking and lifestyle. In Acts 17.18 we meet the Epicureans and Stoics, two of the best-known Greek philosophical schools of that time.
Roman

The Jews were governed by Roman law and kept in order by Roman military power. Political unity and lasting peace (the 'Pax Romana'), and the good communications afforded by the Mediterranean Sea and the famous Roman roads, facilitated trade and travel.

So Jesus’s world was moulded by these three cultures. Together, they embrace the three fundamental arenas of human life - spiritual (the Jewish faith), intellectual (Greek philosophy and art), and practical (Roman administration and technology). In Graham Scroggie’s words, “These peoples and phases of thought are representative for all time . . . .”

The inscription on Jesus’s cross was written in the languages of these three representative cultures - Hebrew, Latin and Greek. It’s as if all mankind was gathered round the Cross to witness the sacrifice Jesus made for all people for all time.

Nativity

Prologue

The story begins in the Temple in Jerusalem between 8BC and 3BC in the days of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Herod the Great was the half-Jewish vassal king of Judea. He reconstructed the Temple that had been rebuilt after the Exile - a grand scheme started around 20BC and still unfinished during Jesus’s public ministry five decades later (see John 2.20).

Here in Herod’s Temple, the angel Gabriel tells a priest named Zacharias that his wife will bear him a son (Luke 1.5-23). This son will be God’s messenger to call the nation to repentance and prepare the way for Jesus’s ministry (see Matthew 11.10, which quotes Malachi 3.1; and Luke 3.4-6, which quotes Isaiah 40.3-5).

And so Zacharias’ barren wife Elizabeth conceives, and John the Baptist is born (Luke 1.80).

The announcement to Mary

A few months later, God sends the angel Gabriel to Nazareth – an unimpressive little town in Galilee (compare John 1.46) - to a betrothed virgin called Mary. Gabriel announces that she will bear a child, conceived by the Holy Spirit. His name is to be Jesus (Luke 1.26-38). This child will be no less than the Son of God Himself; He will sit on David’s throne and reign over God’s people for ever.

So Mary is “found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1.18). The Word of Life begins human life as a tiny foetus in a virgin womb. God the Son, Who had been with the Father from the beginning (John 1.1-2) now becomes Man. He is Immanuel, meaning ‘God with us’ (Matthew 1.23). Through this baby growing within Mary’s womb, all God’s promises to His people would be fulfilled!

But in Jewish society, to be pregnant whilst betrothed was evidence of adultery - a disgrace of the highest order. Her betrothed husband Joseph can either expose her as an adulteress, which carried a severe penalty, or divorce her. Not willing to shame her publicly, he chooses to divorce her in relative privacy. So an angel appears to Joseph, too, assuring him that Mary’s pregnancy is of God and telling him to name the baby Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1.18-24). God’s wonderful
promises to His people had been sabotaged by sin. Now God was going to deal with sin through this Child. Mary was indeed “highly favoured” among women (Luke 1.28 NIV) - more blessed by far than any other woman in history. Yet her life - and Joseph’s life - had been turned upside down. They had doubtless anticipated a quiet life together. Was this dream to be shattered? And what did their families, friends and neighbours think, when they learned of visitations from the angel Gabriel, announcing news that seemed scarcely credible?

And what went through everyone’s mind when they observed unmarried Mary’s increasingly obvious pregnant condition? The reproach from those who didn’t believe Mary’s pregnancy was a miracle must have dogged her for years. Joseph - at least in the first months - doubtless had to shield her from verbal and physical abuse. The stigma of illegitimacy would have still followed Jesus into adult life (as John 8.41 may imply).

And as well as shame, anguish would one day pierce Mary’s soul (Luke 2.35) as, in the end, she witnessed His tortured, mangled body on the Cross.

But in Mary, God had found a woman of faith - a woman to whom He could safely entrust these unparalleled joys and sorrows. Her trusting and obedient response to God’s words through Gabriel echoes down the ages: “let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1.38). The first woman, distrusting God, disobeyed (Genesis 3.6); this woman, trusting Him, obeys. Mary gives herself and her body into God’s hands to do His will.

**Immanuel**

Luke tells us the story of Jesus’s birth (Luke 2.1-20). In God’s providence, Emperor Augustus’s census ensures that Jesus is born in King David’s home town, Bethlehem - as Micah had prophesied centuries before (Matthew 2.3-6, Micah 5.2). God’s King of David’s line is born in David’s town.

In a one-roomed Palestinian shanty, where man and beast share a single roof (this seems the most likely scenario) Mary gives birth. God becomes flesh, incarnate as a helpless infant nestling in a feeding trough. In songwriter Graham Kendrick’s words:

- The One in whom we live and move
- In swaddling cloths lies bound
- The voice that cried “let there be light”
- Asleep without a sound
- The One who strode among the stars
- And called each one by name
- Lies helpless in a mother’s arms
- And must learn to walk again

Just as angels sang at Earth’s creation (Job 38.4-7), now they celebrate our Saviour’s birth (Luke 2.13-14). God’s angels watch intently what God is doing in this realm of creation. They rejoice every time Satan’s dark dominion is pushed back - and Jesus’s birth heralded Satan’s total defeat. No wonder they sang! Choirs of angels appeared to shepherds nearby. These shepherds’ flocks may very well have been those that supplied the lambs for the Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. Now these astonished shepherds behold the true Lamb of God.

A few weeks later, Mary and Joseph go up to Jerusalem to offer the appointed sacrifice (Leviticus 12.1-8) and pay Jesus’s redemption money (see Exodus 13.2,12-15, Numbers 18.15-16). Luke 2.22-39 tells the story. Whilst there, faithful Simeon prophesies over Jesus. And aged prophetess Anna speaks about Him to those faithful Israelites who were waiting expectantly for God’s Messiah to redeem Israel. Jesus’s coming releases a new stream of prophecy. God begins to speak again to His people through His prophets - through Mary (Luke 1.46-55), Zacharias (Luke 1.67-79), and Simeon.

**Gentiles from the East**

Perhaps a few months after Jesus’s birth, magi from the East (probably Mesopotamia) come looking for the newborn King (Matthew 2.1-12). These magi (a word related to our term ‘magic’) were astrologers who served as advisors to kings. They had seen a star that signified the birth of a King of Israel.

Naturally, they go first to the royal city Jerusalem to find this King. But Herod redirects them to Bethlehem, where they find Jesus and worship Him. Their costly gifts are fit for a king; this little child born in a manger is King of all the Earth. The coming of these Eastern sages foreshadows the Gentiles’ welcome into God’s covenant people – and the day when all the nations of the world will stream to Him and pay Him homage (see Psalm 72.8-11,15 - gold is named in verse 15; and Isaiah 60.1-9 - gold and frankincense are named in verse 6).

Herod, fearing this newborn King might claim his throne, orders the death of all the infant boys around Bethlehem. Through this king, Satan tries to destroy the promised Seed of the woman. But Jesus escapes. Warned by God, Joseph had already taken his family to Egypt; after Herod’s death they settle in Nazareth (Matthew 2.13-23).
Jesus was born of the virgin Mary (Matthew 1.23, which quotes Isaiah 7.14). She was Jesus’s true biological mother. Donald Macleod explains: “She contributed to him exactly what any human mother contributes to her child: ovum, genes, ordinary foetal development and ordinary parturition.” God took one of Mary’s egg cells and by His Spirit miraculously formed from it (in a way we cannot explain) a human foetus complete with full male genetic complement (see Matthew 1.20, Luke 1.35).

At conception, every person except Jesus begins to share the sin nature common to mankind (see Psalm 51.5). But Jesus was conceived “from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1.20) and, though biologically related to all of us through Mary, He was without sin (John 8.46, 2 Corinthians 5.21, 1 Peter 2.22, 1 John 3.5).

Mary was of King David’s line. It seems clear that Luke gives Jesus’s genealogy through Mary; the most likely explanation is that Mary is Heli’s daughter, but Joseph (as head of the household) is named as Heli’s offspring instead. So Jesus was a true biological descendant of David “according to the flesh” (Romans 1.3 and see Psalm 132.11, Acts 2.29-30). And He was descended from the first man, Adam. Jesus is biologically related to you and me, and to every person who has ever lived. It is vital that He should be. Only then could He be our Saviour.

Foot Note: Jesus’s amazing genealogy

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus “had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2.17). Jesus’s genealogy demonstrates this in a remarkable way. It’s an astonishing demonstration of how closely He was identified with fallen humanity. It includes Perez (Matthew 1.3), conceived through illicit sex (Genesis 38.1-30); Rahab, almost certainly the Gentile prostitute of Joshua 2; Ruth, a Moabitess, and so belonging to a tribe excluded from God’s people, according to Deuteronomy 23.3: “none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD for ever”. David’s son Solomon was born through adultery, and murder was involved, too (compare Leviticus 20.10). Jesus’s ancestors also include evil kings like Jehoram (2 Kings 8.16-18) and Ahaz (2 Kings 16.2-4).

Fully God, fully Man

Jesus wasn’t merely a Person indwelt by God’s Spirit, as a Christian is. He was fully God as well as fully Man (Colossians 2.9). He possessed both a divine nature and a human nature, but He was a single Person.

Fully God

Jesus never went around loudly boasting about His divinity. He did not need to. He simply demonstrated it beyond all doubt - quietly, consistently, in so many different ways. He made clear declarations of His divine nature; for example, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8.58) and “I and the Father are one” (John 10.30). To the Jews His claims were clear (see John 5.18, 8.58-59, 10.33).
and watch with me” (Matthew 26.37-38).

Like a normal human growing and maturing into adulthood, Jesus “increased in wisdom” (Luke 2.52) – he underwent the normal human process of learning through mental acquisition of knowledge, and through experience and practice.

His knowledge, of course, was exceptional. For example, He knew people’s thoughts (Luke 6.8, 9.47). He read Nathanael’s character (John 1.47-48); He knew the Samaritan woman’s marital history and present sinful cohabitation (John 4.18). He knew Judas would betray Him (Matthew 26.21-25) and that Peter would deny Him (Matthew 26.34). He had a profound understanding of people’s innermost character: John the Apostle tells us that Jesus “knew what was in man” (John 2.25). His innate mental and intuitive capacities were indeed remarkable; yet He was dependent on His Father for guidance and wisdom just as we ourselves are to be.

But His knowledge did not seem to be limitless – as Millard Erickson points out, “Jesus frequently asked questions, and the impression given by the Gospels is that he asked because he did not know” (see Mark 9.21 and especially Mark 13.32). But though it seems His knowledge (as a Man) wasn’t limitless, He was never in error.

And Jesus was tempted in every way that we are - yet without sin (Hebrews 4.15). Dorothy Sayers commented: “He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death.” And Jesus’s perfect human nature, far from protecting Him from sorrow, made Him uniquely susceptible. His sufferings began long before the Cross. Donald Macleod observes: “...Christ moved among men with an exquisite, unfallen sensitiveness to the pain, the squalor, the oppression and the degradation around him. He had to live amid the manifestations of sin, see it, hear it, feel it, everywhere; suffer for it, bear it . . . .”

Foot Note  
Our sympathetic High Priest

And being made a man and living in this fallen world as we have to do, Jesus understands and empathises with our own troubles and temptations and struggles perfectly. The writer to the Hebrews says: “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4.15); “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” (Hebrews 2.18).

In becoming human, Jesus “made himself nothing” (Philippians 2.7) by taking the humble position of a slave - a person without advantages, rights or privileges. But though he humbled Himself in becoming human, He did not humiliate Himself. God made mankind in His image and likeness (Genesis 1.26-27). Our human nature is compatible with God’s nature in such a way that God could become human without incongruity or shame. God has invested human nature with glory that no other living creature possesses.

Growing into Manhood

Jesus lives in Nazareth until His public ministry begins. During that time, Mary has other children (see Matthew 13.55). One of these children is James, who became the leading elder in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12.17, 21.18, Galatians 1.19). This James is almost certainly the writer of the Epistle of James.

Our Lord passed through childhood and adolescence and on into adulthood just as we do, but without sin (Luke 2.52). He subjected Himself to Joseph and Mary (Luke 2.51), according to God’s Law (see Exodus 20.12) - and
Despite their failures and misunderstandings as parents (see Luke 2.48-50). He played and learned; He explored and marvelled at the creation that He Himself had made (John 1.3,10). As true Man, His relationship with God grew and deepened, even though, as God, He had been with the Father from eternity (John 1.2).

Jesus Himself spent the greater part of his life as a young man living quietly at home, working in the family carpentry and building business. God’s command to Adam was to work (Genesis 2.15), and Jesus worked. He contributed economically and socially to his little community in the quiet backwater of Nazareth. His life, in T.C. Hammond’s words, was “far more than the leading up to and preparation for His death”. Jesus was God’s new Adam, living out His life on Earth just as God intended people to live. He was, in fact, the only completely normal human being who ever walked this earth.

Jesus the new Adam

Jesus was a new Adam. We’ve met other people like Adam before:
- The first was Noah. He stepped out of the ark into a newly cleansed Earth – like Adam in the newly created Earth. God blessed Noah and commissioned him in the same way as he did the first human pair.
- God promised Abraham a land and many descendants, and blessed him – reflecting Adam’s commission and blessing.
- Aaron the High Priest pictures Adam, too. He served God in His Tabernacle home, as Adam and Eve were to do in God’s garden home.
- Later, Solomon pictured Adam ‘come of age’. He ruled the Promised Land – God’s abundant paradise - with wisdom.
- Finally, the whole nation Israel was like a new Adam – a new mankind. Like Adam, God appointed them to look after His paradise, and serve and worship Him there.

All these people who pictured Adam foreshadowed something of what God planned for mankind. Now Jesus Christ, the perfect Adam, has come.

The fourfold portrait of Jesus

Each Gospel writer gives us a unique view of Jesus’s life and character. These four biographies harmonise into a complete portrait of our Lord. They have all the hallmarks of eye-witness accounts: at first sight they seem to conflict in some places but, on closer scrutiny, they dovetail together.

Jesus’s calling

Jesus came to be God’s Servant King; in Matthew, we see Jesus as the promised King; in Mark we see Him as the Suffering Servant, who lays down His life for us.

Jesus’s character

Jesus was fully God, and fully human, too. Luke emphasises His perfect humanity; in John we see Jesus as God made flesh.

Matthew’s view • Jesus the King

Matthew, one of the disciples, is almost certainly the man called Levi by Mark and Luke. Matthew wrote his Gospel with a Jewish audience in mind. He quotes copiously from the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, emphasising that it was being fulfilled (see, for example, Matthew 1.22-23, 2.15,17-18, 26.56). This was the kind of evidence that Jews would need.

The promised Messiah

Matthew presents Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah - God’s king, the Son of David and true heir to David’s throne, who would save God’s people (see Matthew 1.21) and establish God’s Kingdom. Jesus is called ‘Son of David’ more often in Matthew than all the other Gospels combined, beginning with the very first verse (see for example, Matthew 1.1, 20.30-31, 21.9,15). Matthew begins with Jesus’s descent from Abraham through David – crucial evidence for a Jew. And he introduces the idea of a king right at the beginning - with eastern sages looking for a king (Matthew 2.1-2).

The Kingdom of God

Matthew’s Gospel refers to God’s Kingdom more times than any other Gospel – most often as “the kingdom of heaven” (a Jewish way of speaking that avoids using God’s Name).

From Matthew, we learn that the people of God’s Kingdom will no longer be the Jewish religious leaders, but a new people (Matthew 21.43). Three times in Matthew’s account, Jesus calls those Jewish religious leaders who oppose Him
The Big Journey ten  ►  Immanuel, God with us

The new Moses

In Matthew, too, we see Jesus as a new Moses. Moses was God’s great prophet who played a unique role in the creation of Israel as a nation (see Deuteronomy 34.10). Moses said that another Prophet would arise (Deuteronomy 18.15, quoted in Acts 3.22 and 7.37). Through this new Moses, God would create a new people. As David G. Peterson explains, “A succession of prophets was raised up to follow Moses, but none was recognised as a prophet specifically like Moses himself.” That prophet like Moses is Jesus.

In Matthew’s account, we see Jesus as a new Moses right at the beginning. Just as Moses is saved amid the slaughter of babies (Exodus 1.15-2.10), so is Jesus (Matthew 2.16-18).

God gave His Law (the Hebrew word torah means ‘instruction’ or ‘guidance’) through Moses; in Matthew we see Jesus as a new Moses, instructing and teaching. Matthew gives no less than 8 chapters over to Jesus’s teaching (5.1-7.29, 10.5-42, 13.1-52, 18.1-35, 24.1-25.46). Interestingly, He arranges His teaching in five blocks, reminding us of the books of Moses, which were also five in number (Genesis to Deuteronomy).

The first of these blocks of teaching is what we call ‘the Sermon on the Mount’. Jesus goes up “on the mountain” and teaches His disciples (Matthew 5.1). God gave His law to Israel through Moses on a mountain. Now, on another mountain, Jesus gives His disciples the true interpretation of that Law.

Mark’s view  ●  God’s Servant

Mark’s Jewish name was John. He’s named a number of times in the New Testament (for example Acts 12.12, 25; 2 Timothy 4.11). He may have been the young man who fled naked from the scene of Jesus’s arrest - only Mark mentions this incident (Mark 14.51).

Matthew is our teacher, Luke is our historian and John our theologian; but Mark is our dramatist. His account is, in Graham Scroggie’s words, “conversational, colloquial, graphic, concise, abrupt, vigorous, forceful, realistic” - like a newspaper report. It’s the kind of script to inspire a film director. For example, compare Mark’s account of Jesus healing the epileptic boy (Mark 9.14-27) with the parallels in Matthew 17.14-18 and Luke 9.37-43.

It’s characteristic of Mark to give details of Jesus’s emotions – pity (1.41), anger and distress (3.5), amazement (6.6), deep sighing in His spirit (8.12), indignation (10.14), love (10.21) – and gestures (Mark 3.5, 10.16, and especially 7.32-35, 8.22-26). Mark alone records such vivid touches as His relatives’ plan to seize Jesus, thinking He was out of His mind (3.20-21), and Jesus and His disciples having “no leisure even to eat” (Mark 6.31).

It’s clear that Mark’s Gospel is an eye-witness account - and that eye-witness was almost certainly Peter. It’s believed that Mark got much of his material from Peter. Peter refers to “Mark, my son” and implies that he is in close contact with Mark when he writes his first letter (1 Peter 5.13). This Mark is doubtless our Gospel writer. If so, Mark knew Peter well. In Mark’s fast-moving account we can hear Peter, the man of action rather than reflection!

The Son of God, our Saviour

Mark, in T. Desmond Alexander’s words, depicts Jesus as “the Son of God who suffers to ransom others”.

He is the Son of God (1.1, 3.11, 5.7, 15.39), with power over sickness and demons and over the unruly forces of nature. As the Divine Son, He does battle with Satan and all those allied to him - including the Jewish religious authorities (see 3.22-30).

But though He is the Messiah, the Son of God, we find Jesus forbidding people to broadcast their healing (for example Mark 1.44, 5.43), and healing in private (7.32-37, 8.22-26), avoiding the crowds (for example, Mark 7.24, 9.30) and commanding His disciples “to tell no one about him” (Mark 8.30). We find this theme of secrecy in all three Synoptic Gospels, but it’s most prominent in Mark.
Why does Jesus want to keep His identity and His healing work secret? Because Jesus was not the messiah of popular imagination - a national liberator and religious restorationist. God’s people did not need rescue from political and military oppression, or freedom from religious corruption. They needed rescue from indwelling sin. And only the Messiah’s death on the Cross could do that.

Only after the Cross could His disciples truly grasp what the Messiah needed to do to save mankind. Only after the Cross, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, was it appropriate for Him to be publicly proclaimed Messiah (compare Acts 2.14-41).

In Mark we learn about true discipleship. Jesus is the Suffering Servant; those who follow Him must serve and suffer, too. Each time Jesus speaks about His death, He then spells out what being His disciple really means (Mark 8.34-38, 9.35-37, 10.42-45). I, too, must take up my cross and renounce myself – that is, I must quit putting myself at the centre of my life (Mark 8.34). I, too, must be a servant (Mark 9.35, 10.42-44). I, too, must suffer persecution: when Jesus tells His disciples they will receive a hundredfold in this world, Mark uniquely adds “with persecutions” (Mark 10.30).

Luke knew Paul well and accompanied him on some of his travels. Paul mentions Luke in Colossians 4.14, 2 Timothy 4.11 and Philemon 24. Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11.13, see Galatians 2.7-9); Luke probably was a Gentile. He addressed his Gospel to Theophilus, a man with a Greek name. We can almost think of this as ‘Paul’s Gospel’; Irenaeus (an early church leader) said, “Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.”

Like a true biographer, Luke carefully sifts the accounts of Jesus’s life and teaching and arranges them in order (Luke 1.1-4, see Acts 1.1-2), placing his account in its wider historical setting (Luke 2.1-2, 3.1-2). And he begins at the beginning, with Gabriel’s announcement of John Baptist’s birth.

Luke was a doctor - Paul’s “beloved physician” (Colossians 4.14). As we’d expect from a medical man, Luke has a keen interest in people. Indeed, he writes his Gospel to an individual, Theophilus. People such as Zachariah, Zaccheus, and Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus road spring to life in Luke’s account. He sketches some wonderful portraits of women for us - Elizabeth, Mary the mother of Jesus, Anna, the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7.36-50), and Martha and Mary. And Luke the doctor includes more healing miracles than the other Gospels.

Luke, a keen observer of people, portrays Jesus as a perfect human being. He emphasises the human aspects of His life and ministry. For example, he alone mentions the manger and Jesus’s baby clothes (Luke 2.7). Only Luke mentions anything of Jesus’s boyhood. He reports the frantic search for the missing boy Jesus (Luke 2.41-50). He tells us that Jesus was subject to Joseph and his mother, a model for every child (Luke 2.51, and compare Ephesians 6.1-3, Colossians 3.20). Only Luke notes the women who provide for the ordinary material needs of Jesus and His disciples (Luke 8.2-3).

God’s suffering Servant

Jesus, to repeat our quotation above, “suffers to ransom others”. He is God’s Suffering Servant, fulfilling Isaiah 52.13-53.12. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10.45). Three times Jesus predicts His suffering, rejection, death and resurrection (Mark 8.31-33, 9.30-32, 10.32-34). There are parallel passages in the other Synoptic Gospels. But Mark places them in three successive chapters, as if he doesn’t want us to miss what Jesus is saying. And only Mark records the fear of those who followed Jesus as He strode out resolutely towards Jerusalem and death (Mark 10.32).
Luke weaves many details of ordinary human life into his account. Jesus receives hospitality in different homes (5.29, 7.36, 10.38-42, 11.37, 14.1, 19.5-7, 24.28-30), and sorts out a minor domestic dispute (Luke 10.38-42). Jesus tells stories about a traveller needing bread (11.5-8), a woman searching for her lost coin (15.8-10), joy - and family conflict - over a prodigal’s homecoming (15.1-32), a sacked steward’s crafty plan (16.1-8), a traveller tending a wounded man (10.25-37).


In Luke especially, Jesus gets to the nitty-gritty of our daily life. He deals with our attitude to money and goods (see 12.16-21, 32-34, 16.9-11, 21.1-4 and compare 19.1-10). We’re to be hospitable to the poor and disadvantaged (Luke 14.12-14 and see 16.19-31). A despised Samaritan is our example of neighbourliness (10.29-37).

And Luke emphasises prayer; as a perfect Human, Jesus lives a life of prayer – (for example 5.16, 6.12, 9.28, 22.31-32). By His example as well as His teaching (6.28, 11.1-13, 18.1-8, see 22.40) Jesus instructs us in the practice of prayer.

Luke presents Jesus as the Saviour of all people. The words ‘to save’, ‘salvation’ and ‘Saviour’ collectively appear more frequently in Luke than in the other Gospels. When Zacchaeus receives Jesus and repents, Jesus tells him, “Today salvation has come to this house . . . . For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19.9). Here Luke captures his theme of salvation.

Jesus is the friend of sinners, the One Who seeks out the lost (compare Luke 15.1-32). Jesus reaches out to those of low social standing, the poor and the despised. Luke demonstrates that Jesus Himself was born into a family of modest means – we see this from the offering, prescribed for the poor, that Joseph and Mary made (Luke 2.24, see Leviticus 12.8). Humble shepherds are the first to learn of Jesus’s birth (2.8-20). Jesus eats with tax-collectors (Luke 5.29-32, 19.1-10), and allows a woman of bad repute to wash and perfume His feet (Luke 7.36-50). He asks the Father to forgive the soldiers cruelly piercing His hands and feet (23.34); a dying criminal receives salvation (23.39-43).

Salvation is for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus will be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” as well as “for glory to your people Israel” (2.32). Luke alone records John the Baptist’s words: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3.6). Luke takes Jesus’s genealogy back to Adam (3.23-38), the ancestor of all people, not just of the Jewish nation. And at the end of Luke’s Gospel, we read these words about Jesus: “and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (24.47).

The day of salvation arrives with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost – an event Luke himself records (Acts 2.1-4). In his Gospel, Luke seems to be preparing us for the Spirit’s coming by focusing on the Spirit’s activity. We see the Holy Spirit active from the beginning – filling John the Baptist (1.15), Elizabeth (1.41), and Zechariah (1.67), guiding Simeon (2.27), and filling and leading (4.1), and empowering (4.14) our Lord Himself. Jesus rejoices in the Holy Spirit (Luke 10.21). He tells us that the Father will give the Spirit to those who ask (11.13) and that the Spirit will teach His disciples in their hour of persecution (12.11-12). And Luke alone records Jesus’s promise of the Spirit after His resurrection (Luke 24.49, compare Acts 1.4-8).

John’s view  Jesus, God made flesh

John the Gospel writer is almost certainly John the apostle. He appears to have been a close relative of Jesus. Matthew 27.55-56 and Mark 15.40 and John 19.25 together identify four women present at Jesus’s crucifixion. If we assume the same women are referred to by each Gospel writer (which seems highly likely), then we can deduce that John’s mother was Salome, who in turn was the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus.
John himself tells us why he wrote his Gospel: “these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20.31).

Matthew, Mark and Luke are collectively called the ‘synoptic’ Gospels (meaning that they see things from a similar viewpoint). They all relate to Jesus’s earthly ministry and life. But John reveals Jesus as the incarnate Son of God (John 1.14). He focuses on the spiritual aspects of Jesus’s Person, life and ministry in prose that is wonderfully simple, direct and profound. Elemental spiritual concepts such as believing, life, love, light, and truth are woven through his Gospel.

For example, we learn about new birth (3.1-8), spiritual worship (4.21-24), and living water (4.7-15, 7.37-38). In John, we see Jesus as the bread of life (6.35,48-51) and this world’s light (1.9, 8.12, 9.5). Jesus loves His disciples (13.1-34, 15.9,12) and commands them to love each other (13.34-35). Only John records Jesus teaching about God making His home in the believer (14.23, and see 14.17). In John’s Gospel, we learn much more about the work of the Holy Spirit (see 14.6-17,26, 15.26-27, 16.7-15). In John alone we overhear Jesus’s sublime High Priestly prayer (17.1-26).

Eight miraculous signs

John records just eight miracles, six of which are unique to his Gospel. They were ‘signs’ – chosen to convey spiritual truth. For example, the feeding of the five thousand is recorded by the Synoptists as well as by John (John 6.1-13), but only John records Jesus speaking about Himself as the Bread of Life (6.22-58). John’s eight signs are: turning water into wine (2.1-11); healing the nobleman’s son (4.46-54) and the infirm man by the pool of Bethesda (5.1-16); feeding the 5,000 (6.1-13); walking on the water (6.16-21); healing the man blind from birth (9.1-34); raising Lazarus (11.17,21); and the miraculous catch of fish (21.1-14).

“The Word became flesh”

In the opening chapter, John declares that “the Word became flesh”; John reveals Jesus as God Incarnate, “the only Son from the Father” (1.14).

Jesus was fully man; His body was a real human body (see 1.14, 4.6, 19.34, 20.24-27 and see also 1 John 1.1, 4.2-3, 2 John 1.7).

And He is fully God. The opening verse of John’s Gospel is unequivocal: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1.1). Jesus has life in Himself (1.4, 5.26), true only of God. He gives eternal life (10.27-28) – something only God can do. John records Jesus’s astonishing words: “Before Abraham was, I am” (8.58) – recalling God’s disclosure of Himself as ‘I am’ (for example, Isaiah 43.10, and compare Exodus 3.14). Towards the end of the Gospel, Thomas worships Him, exclaiming “My Lord and my God!” (20.28). John is pressing home to us that Jesus is God.

And throughout John’s Gospel we see Jesus’s divine Sonship. Jesus addresses God as ‘Father’ in John’s Gospel far more often than in the others; John reveals the intimacy of the Son’s relationship with His Father (for example, 10.30, 17.21).

Shepherds and their sheep with Bethlehem in the background; a photograph taken in the 1940s. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10.11,14).

And unlike the other Gospels, where (in Graham Scroggie’s words) “the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah is represented as coming gradually”, people recognise Jesus as Messiah from the beginning of John’s Gospel (1.41 and compare 1.29,34,36,45,49). Although most do not believe in Him (12.37), throughout John’s Gospel we find people who do believe (for example 2.11, 4.39-42,53, 7.31, 9.35-38, 11.25-27, 16.27, 17.6-8).

John’s Gospel, in one writer’s words, “is saturated with the thoughts, imagery, and language of the Old Testament”.

We find Old Testament symbolism and allusions throughout - for example, the angels of God descending and ascending (1.51, see Genesis 28.12), the brass serpent in the wilderness (3.14-15, see Numbers 21.7-9), the living water (7.37-39, see Exodus 17.6, Numbers 20.2-11, Ezekiel 47.1-12 and Zechariah 14.8).

Jesus is greater than Abraham (8.53-58) and than Moses (see 1.17). He is the One Whom Moses wrote about (5.46), and the One Whom Isaiah saw and spoke about (12.41).

Jesus is the true Manna (6.30-33,49-51, see Exodus 16.13-15,31, Numbers 11.7-9, Deuteronomy 8.3-16, Nehemiah 9.15), the Good Shepherd (10.11-15, see Ezekiel 34.11-16,23) and the True Vine (15.1-8, see Isaiah 5.1-7, Jeremiah 2.21, Psalm 80.8-16). Jesus is our Passover Lamb Who died at Passover time (see 18.28, 19.14), and Whose bones were not broken (19.31-36, see Exodus 12.46).
John gives a special place to Tabernacle and Temple symbolism. In the very first chapter, John tells us that Jesus 'tabernacled' among us (1.14 - the word ‘dwelt’ here is literally 'pitched a tent'). Once, God lived with His people in the Tabernacle and in the Temple that replaced it; now God dwelt on Earth in the Person of His Son. Jesus Himself was the Temple (see 2.18-21). And just as God’s glory filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40.34-35) and the Temple (1 Kings 8.10-11), His glory now shone out from Jesus (1.14).

The Tabernacle was God’s house; His presence filled its innermost chamber, the Most Holy Place. And (as we explained in Session 7) the actual arrangement of the Tabernacle and its furniture show us how to enter His presence and enjoy fellowship with Him. Now Jesus has opened up the way for us through “the true tabernacle” (Hebrews 8.2, see 9.11) — that is, the heavenly dwelling place of God that is pictured by the earthly Tabernacle — into the very presence of God (see Hebrews 6.19-20).

Amazingly, the Tabernacle symbolism in John’s Gospel seems to reflect the plan of the Tabernacle. It’s as if John is taking us on a journey through the Tabernacle into the very presence of God - the route that Jesus has opened up for us. Let’s take a moment to explore this.

In John 1.29,36 Jesus is called “the Lamb of God” - the fulfilment of countless sacrifices offered at the bronze altar in the Tabernacle courtyard. Jesus tells Nicodemus about being born of water and the Spirit (3.5). This reminds us of the basin, filled with water for the priests to wash in and symbolising “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3.5, and compare Ezekiel 36.25).

Now we enter the Holy Place with its table of showbread, lampstand and incense altar. Jesus is the bread of life (6.35,51-56) – this recalls the showbread, Jesus is the light of the world (8.12, 9.5) - here is the lampstand or menorah. Then we encounter the altar of incense in front of the veil. Incense symbolises prayer (see Psalm 141.2, Revelation 5.8); John – alone among the Gospel writers – records Jesus’s great ‘High Priestly’ prayer (17.1-26).

Why did Jesus come?

Satan caused Adam to think wrongly about God. So, from that moment, God began step by step to reveal Himself to mankind. Finally, God, who “spoke to our fathers by the prophets” (Hebrews 1.1) came to Earth Himself in the Person of His Son. Jesus was “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1.15) and “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1.3). He came to show people what God was really like (John 1.18). He said to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14.9).

Jesus shows us what God is like

Jesus, the world saw, for the first time since the Garden of Eden, what a real man was. He was, in John Taylor’s words, “the only truly natural Man who has ever lived”.

Life in a sinful world makes us apt to think sin is our normal condition. But it isn’t. Sin is quite foreign to human nature as God created it. Sin has warped and perverted us. Jesus’s character and life show us what God meant us to be - His selfless love, humility, unpretentious dignity and calm authority; His reaction to provocation and insult (and we reveal ourselves more by our reactions than by our actions); His patience and kindness, tenderness and compassion; His fearless courage and righteous anger; His penetrating insight; and His dependence on God and obedience to Him.

A striking aspect of Jesus’s humanity is His prayer life (for example, Luke 5.16, 6.12, 11.1). John Taylor observed: “Prayer was the atmosphere in which He moved and had
His being; prayer preceded every decision, and anchored Him within His Father's Will; . . . ."

Jesus reveals mankind's sin

But Jesus also reveals the true nature of sinful mankind. If we want to know what depths of rebellion and wickedness we are capable of, given opportunity, then Jesus shows us that, too - by people's reaction to Him. His teaching and miracles called forth the hatred of the unbelieving Jewish leaders, that ended in them murdering Him. Jesus's words and works provoked them and revealed the true state of their hearts.

Jesus is the new Adam

Jesus often calls Himself “the Son of Man” (for example, Matthew 9.6, Mark 10.33, Luke 19.10 and John 13.31). This title firstly tells us He is truly human. Jesus was God's new Adam. He lived out His life on Earth just as God intended mankind to live. Adam was the first man; Jesus was the second Man (see 1 Corinthians 15.47, see also 1 Corinthians 15.45). Jesus was what Adam should have been.

But the title ‘Son of Man’ also exalts Jesus above every other human. He is the Messiah – He brings salvation to God's people and judgment to God's enemies. God will give Him and His people dominion over this world, as Daniel saw in an astonishing vision (Daniel 7.13-14,18,27). Jesus applies Daniel’s vision to Himself (Matthew 24.30, Matthew 26.63-64). Through Jesus the Son of Man, humanity will receive its God-given destiny – glory and dominion over the Earth (see Genesis 1.26,28, Psalm 8.4-8 and Hebrews 2.5-13).

Inauguration

Jesus’s baptism

Jesus's public ministry is inaugurated by His baptism in Jordan (Matthew 3.13-17 and parallels). But, unlike the others whom John baptised, Jesus doesn’t need to repent. Rather, through this act, Jesus publicly identifies Himself with fallen humanity.

An early photograph of the River Jordan, taken at the end of the 19th century. It's described as 'Place of the baptism, River Jordan, Holy Land'; this spot may be close to where Jesus was baptised.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit, visible as a dove, descends and rests on Him. The Spirit is commissioning Him as God’s Messiah - the promised One Who would save God's people and establish the Kingdom of God.

The word ‘Messiah’ is from the Hebrew mashıaḥ, meaning ‘anointed one’. In the Old Testament, people or objects were anointed by oil to consecrate them for God's special use. Kings and priests were anointed to consecrate them to serve God in their priestly or kingly roles (see Exodus 40.12-15, 1 Samuel 9.27-10.1, 1 Samuel 16.1,11-13).

But instead of being anointed by oil, the Holy Spirit Himself comes and rests on Jesus in the form of a dove. Now Jesus can say: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4.18). Now Jesus is commissioned to fulfil His role as Messiah, God’s Anointed One (see Luke 4.17-21, Acts 10.38). The Father commends Jesus in these words: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3.17). God is confirming Jesus as His Son and His Servant.

In doing so, He echoes two Messianic passages:

► Jesus is God’s Son

The first passage is Psalm 2.7: “... The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; . . . .’” Psalm 2 is about the anointing and coronation of a King Who of David’s dynasty. This Psalm is prophesying about Jesus. He is the long-awaited King of David’s dynasty.

In this Psalm, God proclaims this King as His Son. Now God quotes this Psalm to declare that King Jesus is His Son. As Donald Hagner explains: “Jesus is now marked out as the new Adam who replaces Adam and establishes the new humanity.”

Jesus is our Saviour

Jesus had to be made just like us, but without sin. As the author to the Hebrews tells us: “... he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2.17).

His human perfection was tested to the limit. He grew from infancy to adulthood just as we do all, but without sin. He lived contentedly through the dull monotony of ordinary life. He refused to compromise with the tangled - and entangling - web of family and culture; he passed victorious through temptation, misunderstanding and abuse; he was unmoved by public acclaim. He emerged unscathed from everything that life, humanity and demons could throw at Him. Jesus’s unblemished life from cradle to Cross qualified Him to be our High Priest. And so, being “made perfect” – fully qualified to be our Mediator with God - He became “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Hebrews 5.9).

As our Saviour, Jesus would save God’s people from their sins (Matthew 1.21), and fulfil all the wonderful visions that God showed His prophets. God’s people would indeed live in God’s paradise in God’s presence; and that paradise would be the whole world!

And it’s important to emphasise that, though He was fully God, Jesus did not need to draw on His deity to enable Him to live as a man. He was fully human; He lived a normal human life, in faith and dependence on God just as we are intended to do. That was the whole point. Only in this way could He qualify as our High Priest. Only in this way, therefore, could He be our Saviour.
formally as the Son of God in conjunction with the beginning of his work.”

**Jesus is God’s Servant**  The second passage is Isaiah 42.1: “Behold my servant . . . in whom my soul delights”. Isaiah here speaks of the Messiah as God’s Servant. Jesus was God’s Servant, Who obeyed His Father “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2.8). He offered Himself as the sacrifice for mankind’s sins.

We said above that Old Testament kings and priests were anointed. Jesus is God’s anointed One - He is both King and Priest:

**Jesus is the King**: He is the Messianic King of David’s line (see Luke 1.31-33).

**Jesus is our great High Priest**  As our High Priest, “he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.” (Hebrews 9.12).

Notice how, at this pivotal moment in history, we see all Three Persons of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The whole Trinity is deeply involved in Jesus’s messianic mission. The Son is sent by the Father and empowered by the Spirit for the task that lies ahead.

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The temptation in the wilderness

The Spirit then drives Jesus into the Judean wilderness, where He is tempted by Satan (Luke 4.1-13 and parallels).

Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are - yet without sin (Hebrews 4.15). He never had, as we have, a predisposition to sin. But that doesn’t mean He couldn’t be tempted. Before they fell, Adam and Eve had no inward predisposition to sin. But they could be - and were - tempted. Our sinless Lord could and did feel the powerful pull and the subtle undertow of temptation assaulting His soul. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, Jesus “. . . in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4.15, see also Hebrews 2.17).

His temptations included those common to all humanity. But He also faced temptations peculiar to Him as God’s Messiah. As F.F. Bruce points out (commenting on Hebrews 2.18): “Time and again the temptation came to Him from many directions to choose some less costly way of fulfilling that calling than the way of suffering and death”.

So Jesus, having identified Himself with mankind at baptism, was led by the Spirit into wilderness and temptation:

1. **Would He meet His natural bodily desire for food, outside of His Father’s will?**
2. **Would He test God’s protection of Him (promised in Psalm 91.11-12) through a presumptuously reckless act? In so doing, He would be like the Israelites in the wilderness, who said, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17.7). But, as R.T. France observes, “The Son of God can live only in a relationship of trust which needs no test.”
3. **Thirdly, would He take the easy crossless short-cut to His Messianic goal, and grasp the kingdoms of this world through disloyalty to His Father and capitulation to the Devil?**

All three temptations boiled down to just one: who was at the centre of His life? Was it God, or was it Himself? Would He trust His Father implicitly? Would He obey Him perfectly? In short, would He obey God’s command recorded in Deuteronomy 6.5: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

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**Foot Note: John the Baptist**

Prophesied in Isaiah 40.3-5 and Malachi 3.1, 4.5-6. John the Baptist prepared God’s people for Jesus’s ministry (Luke 3.1-18 and parallels). He warned of judgment and called for repentance that was demonstrated in changed behaviour. He baptised with water, but prophesied that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit.

John was the last and greatest of the long line of Old Testament prophets. He actually saw the things those prophets could only long for - the appearance of the Messiah and the coming of the Kingdom of God in the Person and ministry of Jesus.

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In His three temptations, Jesus re-enacts the temptation of humanity in the Garden of Eden. John the Apostle probably recalls this primal temptation when he tells us about all that is in the world: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2.16 NKJV, compare with Genesis 3.6).

And Jesus’s 40-day temptation in the wilderness doubtless recapitulates Israel’s 40 years of trial in the wilderness - a day for each year (see Deuteronomy 8.2-5; and see Psalm 95.7-11, quoted in Hebrews 3.7-11). Appropriately, Jesus responds to Satan’s temptations by quoting words that God spoke to Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 6.13,16, 8.3).

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**Foot Note The obedient Son**

God’s son Adam (he is called this in Luke 3.38) and God’s son Israel (see Exodus 4.22), both refused to trust God and obey Him. This Son of God, Jesus, is the second Adam and the true Israelite. He trusts and obeys, and so emerges victorious from temptation.
And His obedience in the wilderness reflects the obedience of a lifetime. We marvel at (in John Taylor’s words) “the breath-taking quality of Jesus’ perfect obedience to God.”

Jesus’s public ministry may have begun in the autumn of AD 26, with His crucifixion in AD 30, though dates respectively three years later (AD 29 and AD 33) are also very possible. What is almost certain is that His ministry lasted for around 3½ years. His ministry focused on Galilee, but He travelled outside that region, too – through Samaria and in Judea to the south, in the Decapolis and Gaulanitis to the east, and in Perea to the south-east. One trip to the region of Tyre and Sidon is also recorded. He visited Jerusalem a number of times, typically in connection with one of the Jewish feasts.

Jesus always did His Father’s will (John 4.34, 6.38, 8.29, see also Hebrews 10.5-9); He was obedient even to death (Philippians 2.8).

Jesus’s ministry

Jesus often found Himself opposed by various groups within the Jewish nation – the Pharisees and scribes especially.

Pharisees

The Pharisees were very concerned about keeping the Law strictly. In addition to their commitment to keeping the written Scriptures (especially the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament) they were also committed to keeping the ‘Oral Law’. These unwritten traditions – “the tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15.2, see Galatians 1.14) regulated how people should keep God’s written Law - for example, exactly what could and couldn’t be done on the Sabbath day. Mark 7.1-13 records Jesus taking issue with the Pharisees over two of these traditions. The Pharisees’ big danger was pride in thinking they were blameless in God’s eyes (see Luke 18.9-14 and Paul’s comment about himself in Philippians 3.6).

Scribes

The scribes (or ‘lawyers’) were custodians of the Law, preserving and teaching it.

Sadducees

The Sadducees were a religious and political group of people, and typically well-off. They often held high offices in the Temple. They obeyed only the written Scriptures, and rejected the Pharisees’ oral law. They didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead (see Matthew 22.23) or the immortality of the soul. It seems that nearly all Sadducees were priests – especially those of the most powerful priestly families.

The Herodians were influential men who supported the Herodian dynasty; their theological beliefs were similar to the Sadducees.

Zealots

Zealots were an extreme nationalist group committed to overthrowing the Roman occupation – by violence, if necessary.

Tax collectors

Diametrically opposed to the Zealots were the tax collectors – ‘tax farmers’ who worked for the Romans collecting taxes, and in the process were able to enrich themselves by charging commission on the taxes. They included Jews (for example Zaccheus, Luke 19.1-10); Zealots would have considered such Jews traitors.

Jesus’s disciples

From among His many disciples, Jesus chose 12 men to be close to Him, and whom He could send out to preach and heal (Matthew 10.1-4, Mark 3.13-19, Luke 6.12-16). He discipled these men not only by teaching them (for example Matthew 5.1-2), but by living with them (Mark 3.14). James Ryle remarks: “those you spend your time with will shape your thoughts, your character, and your future”. These men spent time with Jesus.

The 12 disciples were a mixed bunch. There was passionate, fiery John and pessimistic Thomas; Simon the Zealot, perhaps (at least formerly) a zealous nationalist, and Matthew, a tax collector for the Roman occupiers. The tensions between these various men can only be imagined!

And then there’s ambitious, greedy and dishonest Judas, who betrayed his Lord.

We know most about Peter - impetuous, loquacious, devoted yet vacillating Peter. G. Campbell Morgan observed: “All the elements of human nature were present in this man’s personality in a remarkable degree.” We see ourselves reflected in the mirror of Peter’s personality.

This inner circle of 12 men was supplemented by a diverse group of other disciples (see Luke 6.17). And Jesus’s circle included many women. We know from Luke that Mary Magdalene and other women provided for Jesus out of their own means (Luke 8.1-3); they doubtless sometimes accompanied Him on His travels. His attitude to women was remarkable for His day. He conversed freely with women; women were among His followers. Women, not

Men, were the first eyewitnesses to His resurrection (see John 20.11-18, Matthew 28.1-10). There’s good evidence, though it can’t be proved, that Mary Magdalene was the sinner of Luke 7.36-50 and also the Mary of Bethany—these three women may well have been one and the same. If so, hers is one of the outstanding character studies in the Bible.

The new conquest of the land

Jesus is the New Israel, the true Israelite. Like Israel, Jesus comes out of Egypt (Matthew 2.14-15, Hosea 11.1). Israel passed through the Sea of Reeds; Jesus is baptised in the Jordan. Israel was tempted in the wilderness; Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. But unlike Israel, He doesn’t fall to temptation.

Jesus chooses 12 disciples. That number is quite deliberate. He is symbolically reconstituting God’s people, with its 12 tribes.

Then Jesus re-enacts Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua’s leadership (‘Joshua’ and ‘Jesus’ are variants of the same name in Hebrew and Greek respectively). Jesus and His disciples travel through the length and breadth of the land, conquering disease, death and demonic oppression (see, for example, Matthew 10.8) – echoing Israel’s conquest of the cursed Canaanites. They are restoring God’s people to wholeness in soul and in body.

Jesus’s healings are more than acts of compassion. They proclaim what God intends to do with all His people. God will restore us in every aspect of our existence in the world to come – and that includes our physical bodies. Jesus’s healing miracles foreshadow our resurrection to perfect bodily health and wholeness.

And Jesus feeds the crowds in the wilderness (Matthew 14.13-21, 15.32-39 and parallels). He’s making the promised land an abundant paradise. It’s another foretaste of the eternal age to come – foreshadowing the abundant paradise that will be the New Earth.

Foot Note: Casting out the serpent

Jesus, with His disciples, goes through the land, casting out demons and releasing people from Satanic oppression. Dan McCartney comments: “Jesus did what Adam should have done; he cast the serpent out of the garden.”

Cleansing the Temple

The first thing that Jesus does when He visits Jerusalem after His anointing is to cleanse the Temple (John 2.14-22). Tradesmen had filled the Temple precincts, making the “house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11.17) a den of thieves. The Jews ask Jesus for a sign to prove He is acting on God’s authority. He says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2.19). His body was the Temple of God. God lived in Him, not in the magnificent stone structure in which they stood as they contended with Him.

Foot Note: Jesus the true Temple

Solomon built a Temple; Jesus was a Temple. Jesus was the place where God lived on Earth, where people could come and meet with God (see John 14.6), the place where forgiveness could be found. Jesus said to the paralysed man, “Man, your sins are forgiven you” (Luke 5.20) – at a stroke making obsolete the whole sacrificial system based at the Temple.
The Year of Jubilee

Right at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus preaches in the synagogue in Nazareth, His home town (Luke 4.16-30). He reads from Isaiah 61.1-2a. This passage echoes the description of the Year of Jubilee, a special Sabbath year. Not only were the people released from agricultural labour, but Jewish slaves were set free, and family land that was sold off was released back to its original owners (Leviticus 25.8-55). In Leviticus 25.10 we read: “And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.” As if to emphasise the point, Jesus also quotes part of Isaiah 58.6: “to set at liberty those who are oppressed”.

Jesus is telling us that what happened in the Year of Jubilee foreshadowed what He Himself would do. He says: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Immediately Jesus begins to liberate people from Satan’s bondage - from infirmity, demonic possession, guilt. God is releasing His people from the curse.

Bringing in the Sabbath

Sin has torn relationships apart and brought painful toil (Genesis 3.17-19 and compare Genesis 5.28-29). But every week, on the Sabbath Day, no work was to be done; people had time to meet with God and study His Scriptures, time for fellowship with family and friends, time to enjoy nature’s beauty. The Sabbath was God’s appointed day of relief from the curse. It was a day of release from painful toil; it was a day when relationships fractured by the fall could be restored and enjoyed. The Sabbath was “a shadow of the things to come” (Colossians 2.16-17); it pointed forward to the goal of God’s whole plan of redemption, a foretaste of the eternal world to come.

And in addition to Sabbath days, there were Sabbath years, too. These occurred every 7th year, and gave release from toil for a whole year. Finally, the Jubilee year (which occurred every 50 years) brought release from bondage and from separation from home and family for the rest of people’s lives.

The Sabbath was so important to God. That’s why Jesus begins His ministry by declaring God’s great Sabbath Year of Jubilee. And that’s why He deliberately sets about healing people on the Sabbath as well as all the other days (see, for example, Matthew 12.9-14 and Luke 13.10-13). And it’s why Jesus takes issue so hotly with the Jewish leaders over the Sabbath. Plucking ears of corn - and, for some Pharisees, even healing - were considered work and thus forbidden on the Sabbath day (see Matthew 12.1-8 and Luke 13.14-16)! But the Jews had entirely missed the point with all this legalism. Jesus kept the Sabbath as God intended it to be kept. He was releasing people from the curse, healing them and mending their lives. That’s what the Sabbath was all about.

His own did not receive Him

Right at the start of His public ministry, Jesus begins to taste rejection. The Jews in the synagogue at Nazareth - respectable religious people - try to throw him off a nearby cliff. He eludes arrest or worse at least twice more (John 8.59, 10.39 and see also John 5.18). Rejection escalates throughout His ministry, until the final plot to destroy Him is triggered into action by Judas’s betrayal (John 11.46-57; and Luke 22.1-6 and parallels in Matthew and Mark). Satan’s kingdom is being pushed back, and Satan isn’t giving up without a fight. Satan’s seed (compare John 8.44) conspire to kill the Seed of the Woman.

The Messiah’s miracles

As well as the miracles described in detail, multitudes of people knew our Lord’s healing touch (see, for example, Matthew 4.23-24, 8.16-17). Jesus sent His 12 disciples and a larger group of 70 through the land to heal as well as teach. Jesus cast out demons, not with elaborate exorcism, but simply “with a word” (Matthew 8.16). Satan was being robbed of his prey - clear evidence that God’s Kingdom had come in Jesus’s person and ministry (see Matthew 12.22-29, compare Luke 10.17-18). The King Himself is here! Jesus’s ministry opened a new phase in the cosmic battle waged by God against Satan’s kingdom. The Kingdom of God was advancing and people were “pressing into it” (Luke 16.16 NKJV).

His miracles also prove He is God’s Messiah. John the Baptist sends disciples to ask Him whether He really is the Messiah. Jesus replies: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.” (Luke 7.22). These miracles are the proof John needs. Jesus here echoes the words of Isaiah, all of which refer to the work of the Messiah (Isaiah 29.18, 35.5-6 and 61.1, and probably Isaiah 26.19).

Some miracles stand out as especially powerful in demonstrating Jesus as the promised Messiah. For example, He heals a demonised dumb and blind man (Matthew 12.22), cleanses a leper (Luke 5.12-14), heals a man born blind (John 9.1-34) and raises a man who had been dead for three days (John 11.1-44). But Jesus’s miracles are only proof for those willing to
believe (compare Luke 16.31). The Jews keep insisting that Jesus shows them signs and wonders to prove He is the Messiah (Matthew 12.38-42, 16.1-4, Luke 11.16, compare 1 Corinthians 1.22). And Jesus does many signs, but the great majority of the nation still refuse to believe Him (John 12.37-40).

Jesus teaches us about all the fundamental issues of life, and He does so graphically, unforgettably and with astonishing power. His teaching is based firmly on the Old Testament - more than 40 verbatim quotations are recorded. Jesus is a radical in the original sense of the word - His teaching goes to the root of things. He reveals what is really important in life and what isn’t. He is the great Realist; He makes us sit up and see things as they really are - in the light of eternity. For example, He says, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8.36-37 NKJV). Jesus assures us here that our souls are worth more than the entire universe. And He sober us with the thought that we can, if we want, forfeit it all. I can let the untold potential concentrated in my own person slip through my fingers and be lost eternally. That’s reality!

Parables

It was typical of rabbis to tell parables, and Jesus was no exception. He drives eternal truths home to us through stories and imagery that indelibly etch themselves on our minds and make us think. The grain of wheat dying and springing into life; the carefree beauty of the flowers; the simple humility of children; a father’s astonishing love to a delinquent son; the shepherd’s care for his flock; the vine and its branches - these images teach us profound truth.

The parable of the sower (Matthew 13.3-9,18-23 and parallels) is of special significance (see Mark 4.13). It’s one of only two that Jesus explains for us. Through His parables - and through all His teaching - Jesus is sowing seed. What kind of ground are we?

The Kingdom of God

Jesus opens His public ministry with these words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1.15). Jesus frequently speaks about the Kingdom of God and demonstrates God’s authority before their very eyes - through healing and release from demonic oppression (see Matthew 12.28, Luke 10.9, 11.20). Many of His parables teach us about the Kingdom of God. In the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ Jesus tells His disciples - and us - what life in that Kingdom is like (Matthew 5.1-7.29). Jesus teaches His disciples to pray for the Kingdom’s arrival (Matthew 6.10). He speaks about the Kingdom to the eleven disciples after His resurrection (Acts 1.3).

As we saw in Session 1, from the day that Adam and Eve fell, God began to act to restore His Kingdom. He began to bring mankind once again under His rule - and all the blessings of His rule. The rest of the Bible tells how He does this. Jesus’s coming is a new phase in God’s plan to establish His Kingdom on Earth. The King Himself had now come to Earth!

And Jesus’s earthly ministry is a prelude to much greater things! He said: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24.14). That preaching began on the Day of Pentecost; from that day forward the Kingdom came in power and began to grow and advance across the globe (see Mark 9.1). And one day, Jesus will come again and establish His Kingdom in glory – and those who are faithful to Him will eat in fellowship with Him at His eternal banquet (see Luke 13.29 and compare Luke 22.28-30).

Our Father God

Jesus reveals Who God is through His teaching, as well as through His Person and His miracles - countering Satan’s ancient innuendo against God (Genesis 3.1-5). Jesus reveals God as Father. God was the Father of the nation of Israel (Exodus 4.22, Isaiah 64.8). But Jesus reveals Him as Father in a wonderful new way.

He teaches His disciples to address God as Father (Matthew 6.9), to rely on His Fatherly care and provision (Matthew 6.25-34, 7.7-11), to rest in the assurance that He knows them intimately and treasures them (Matthew 10.29-31).

A prodigal son discovers his father’s overwhelming love (Luke 15.11-32); a steward banks his future on his master’s
Jesus often talks about a great division. There is a broad way and a narrow way (Matthew 7.13-14); there are wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7.24-27); trees with good fruit and those with bad (Matthew 7.15-20, 12.33); wheat and weeds (Matthew 13.24-30,36-43); sheep and goats (Matthew 25.31-46).

But Jesus doesn’t just teach about a great division; His teaching itself divides people (John 7.40-43, 9.16). He comes to bring, not peace, but division (Matthew 10.34-36 and Luke 12.51-53). In the end, no-one can sit on the fence. Those who are not with Jesus, are against Him (Luke 11.23, compare Mark 9.40).

**Jesus, Friend of sinners**

And that division isn’t where we might have expected it. The people whom we might have put on the right side of that division, we discover to be on the wrong side. The religious leaders - the sort of people most folk would have been delighted to invite for dinner in their homes - were those who rejected Him; whilst those whom decent folk would have put on the right side of the law - there is a curse on them” (John 7.49 NIV). The Pharisees despised others and thought themselves virtuous

Pharisees despised others and thought themselves virtuous of the law – there is a curse on them” (Matthew 23.26,27). The attitude was: “humanity on the other side (compare Luke 10.25-37). The Jewish religious establishment passed by wounded humanity on the other side (compare Luke 10.25-37). The Pharisees despised others and thought themselves virtuous of the law – there is a curse on them” (Matthew 23.26,27).

Jesus eats with sinners – an act of fellowship with them; the ‘righteous’ Pharisees and scribes despise Him for it (Luke 5.29-32, 15.1-2). At a meal Jesus lets a prostitute publicly kiss and anoint His feet, even letting her hair down to dry them! Allowing such a public exhibition of gratitude from this immoral woman shocks His Pharisee host (Luke 7.36-50).

**“Brood of vipers”**

Why do the Gospels give so much space to the Jewish religious leaders? Because they represent in an overt and extreme form what is in the heart of all mankind. Jesus doesn’t mince His words - He calls the Pharisees a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 12.34); the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees are members of an “evil and adulterous generation” (Matthew 12.39, 16.4). He concludes His public ministry with a scalding indictment of them (Matthew 23.1-36, and compare Luke 11.37-52).

There were noble exceptions (like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) but in the end, the Jewish religious leadership coolly and deliberately rejected Jesus and His message. Those who should have inherited the kingdom would be cast out, and repentant sinners from both Israel and the Gentile nations would take their place (see Matthew 22.1-14, Luke 14.15-24). The vineyard of Israel (Isaiah 5.1-7) would be given to others who would yield fruit for God, who would be fruitful branches of Jesus the true vine (Matthew 21.33-46, John 15.1-8). The fig tree - a symbol of Israel that seems to represent its religious life - was to be felled (see Matthew 21.18-19 and compare Luke 13.6-9).

Fifty years after Jesus’s death, the Romans captured and sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple amid the most appalling suffering and bloodshed. This catastrophe, prophesied by Jesus (Matthew 24.15-22), foreshadows the final judgment at the end of this age. The Arch of Titus that still stands in Rome today depicts the spoils of war looted from the Temple by the Romans, prominent amongst which is the Menorah or lampstand.
Mount Meron, over 1,200 metres high and the most probable site of Jesus's transfiguration.

Image © Avshal Tzach (CC BY 2.5)
radiance of the splendour of His glory as the Son of God.

God repeats His endorsement made at Jesus’s baptism: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”. Jesus’s transfiguration was, in John Taylor’s words, “the natural climax to perfect Man’s undeviating obedience to the Will of God.” He could now have passed painlessly and deathlessly into the presence of God in glory. That would perhaps have been every person’s experience, if mankind had not sinned. But in accordance with what He had taught His disciples only days before, He takes instead the road to humiliation, torture and death.

The Big Journey ten ▶ Immanuel, God with us

Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. They represent the Law and the Prophets, which prophesied about Jesus and prepared the way for Him (see Luke 24.27). Jesus talks with them about His impending death and rising again - a death and resurrection that will fulfil what was written in the Law and the Prophets (see Luke 24.44-47). Now, perhaps, these three privileged disciples begin to understand what Jesus meant when He told them, only days before, about His death. His death is the key to all that God has promised through the Scriptures. That extraordinary moment on the mountain was etched in Peter’s memory for the rest of his life (2 Peter 1.17-18).

The King comes to His City

Around 9 months after His transfiguration, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for His final days before His crucifixion. It is a Passover feast - the one at which He will be the Passover Lamb. Passing through Jericho (Luke 19.1), He enjoys a meal with His disciples in Bethany, where Mary anoints Him (John 12.1-8). Then, requisitioning a donkey, He rides into Jerusalem to the jubilation of the crowds (Matthew 21.1-11). But only days later a mob will echo the cry, “Let him be crucified!” (Matthew 27.20-23).

A conquering king would normally ride a horse. But Jesus is not a great warlord, come to dispossess the Romans. He is the humble King (Matthew 21.4-5, quoting Zechariah 9.9), “obedient to . . . death on a cross”. (Philippians 2.8). Jesus goes to His Father’s house, the Temple. Three years before, He had cleared it of its merchants. But they had simply set up their stalls again and carried on just as before. So now at the end of His ministry, He again cleanses the Temple and begins His final public ministry in that city, now crowded with Passover pilgrims (Mark 11.15-17 and parallels).

Next Session

Crucified and Risen

We trace the events of Jesus’s last few days in Jerusalem, His crucifixion and resurrection and through to His ascension.