1. What are the Gospels?

The Word of God or the words of men?

We listen to the Gospel being read at Mass every Sunday. Perhaps (hopefully) we read the Gospels for ourselves - in prayer? for enlightenment? for moral guidance? to learn more about Jesus?

Over thousands of years, millions of people - both Christian and non-Christian - have turned to these texts for many reasons. Many have gained immensely from their wisdom and found new hope, encouragement and reassurance in both the familiar and in what we seem to discover as if for the first time. The Gospels are a treasure-house. But what are they?

Are they historical accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus?
Are they stories from which we are meant to learn?
Are they even true, or a rose-tinged instance of what the Greeks called *hagiography*: holy writing meant for instruction?

Our first clue comes when we look at when these texts were written. The first - thought to be Mark - was written around 66-70CE, followed probably by Matthew and Luke around 85-90CE, and John around 90-110CE. It is impossible to be precise, but we notice - immediately - a gap of some 35 years between the death of Jesus (30-33CE) and the writing of the first gospel text. The word 'text' here is important because it isn't that nothing was happening during those intervening years: the message of Jesus was spreading across the Mediterranean, reaching Rome and many of the key city ports (Thessaloniki, Corinth, Antioch). We know of the travels and preaching of Paul the Apostle and of his companions and we learn about the travels of others from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and from local traditions across the region.[1]

In those years, the Gospel (literally meaning *Good News*) was preached and taught by word of mouth: writing was not common and used mainly for administration and government. But, over time, elements were written down and passed around through letters and *holy writings* which were kept and revered in the same way that, in Judaism, writings had been kept, read and revered for centuries.

The gospel texts, as we know them, arise from this *oral tradition* which gradually translated into writing - not everywhere, but in key Christian centres.[2]

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[1] Whilst not all local traditions are thought reliable, many may have their basis in true events

[2] It is worth mentioning that there still exist other 'non-canonical' (or 'apocryphal') gospels, for example the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Peter, and the gospel of Judas. The 'canon' of four gospels which we recognise was only determined finally around the 4th century, although already recognised in large part by Irenaeus (c.130-c.202CE)

The Word of God

We are familiar with John's gospel teaching that Jesus is the *logos* - the Word of God spoken to humankind. In it we recognise, already at the beginning of the 2nd century, a deep understanding - indeed faith - that Jesus was not merely a prophet 'pointing towards the one true God' but was himself God's unique and only-begotten Son through whom all Truth is given.

This understanding was rooted in faith, but used the language of the Greek Hellenistic world, into which Jesus and his followers were born, to articulate the deep meaning of Christ's coming.

Through her ongoing Tradition over the centuries, the Church has consistently taught that all scripture is God's Word written in human words, because we recognise that the gospels had human authors who wrote them, each with their particular intentions and communities in mind.[3]

So we read the gospels always with this double perspective. The gospels were written for particular communities, but - like all scripture - they speak to all people, of all cultures, and across the ages. As Hebrews 4:12 says:

> Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Different gospels; different communities

The message of Jesus had spread rapidly in the years following his death, driven forward, as accounted in the Acts of the Apostles, by the Spirit of God given at Pentecost.

Not everyone agreed on the meaning of Jesus' life, his teaching and his death. The account in Acts, together with the letters written by Paul and others, bear witness to tense disagreements and the struggle towards orthodoxy ('true teaching').

Communities grew each in their own way, with different concerns and different traditions.

Mark's gospel, now considered to be the earliest of the canonical gospels, is also the shortest. It has nothing of the infancy and childhood of Jesus, but focuses on his ministry, his healings and his teachings. It ends with his death and, in its shorter form, the promise that he has risen.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke were written for very different communities: the former for, it seems, a community of converts still living in the context of their Jewish faith; the latter for an audience more familiar with a Hellenistic (Greek) worldview. The author of

[3] See *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 18 November 1965

Luke[4] has a clear concern for the sick, the poor and the marginalised, and his gospel speaks particularly to them with compassion and hope.

John's gospel comes from an altogether different world: it is mystical and deeply theological, seeking the deep meaning of the coming of Christ for the world.

Yet the gospels do not draw on entirely different sources: they have commonalities - sometimes precise, sometimes looser - which are recognised today with terms such as 'synoptic' (meaning 'seeing with one eye') or 'double tradition'[5].

The gospel of John is the only gospel which appears to draw substantially from its own, unique, sources.

The Intentions of the Authors

It has taken time for the Church to fully accept that the human authors of the four gospels had their own particular intentions and interests. This understanding has come largely from the detailed examination and comparison of New Testament texts which began in the early 20th century.[6]

The danger of failing to understand the intentions of the human authors can be seen in *fundamentalism*: the taking of texts as meaning only what they can be understood to mean **literally**. It is worthwhile reading *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,[7] to gain a fuller understanding of the Church's teaching.

To ignore the intentions of the authors is to cut off the wealth of meaning which scripture can bear: it is the Word of God written in the words of humanity. It has a kaleidoscopic quality, appearing to change, to speak afresh, yet always the one Word.
The scriptures of both Old and New Testaments are, truly, **inspired text**: written by authors inspired and filled with God's Spirit.

How are we to read the gospels?

This gives us great hope that the words of the gospels are not static, dead or outdated, but always fresh, new, creative and incisive, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote.

[4] We need to recognise that, in reality, we do not know the names of the authors of these texts: their names are handed down to us and may reflect the contexts in which the gospels were written

[5] The 'double tradition' is also known simply as 'Q'. This is a hypothetical source which appears common to Matthew and Luke but not to Mark. These commonalities can be recognised in the text but the existence of particular sources can only ever be hypothetical

[6] You could explore the writings of, for example, Raymond E. Brown

[7] 18 November 1965. A good translation by Austin Flannery O.P., using inclusive language, is offered by Dominican Publications, 1996

In reading them, we can never rest in the belief that we have reached the end of their meaning or exhausted their relevance, because they are God's Word: ever-present, always speaking: *cor ad cor loquitur* ('heart speaks to heart'), as Saint John Henry Newman's motto as cardinal reminds us.

The second letter to Timothy tells us that:

> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.[8]

This gives us some indication of how we should read the gospels: they teach us, correct us, guide us as to what is right and true. Ultimately they serve to inspire our actions and commit, and nourish, us in our work of service to the world.

In exploring the various layers of meaning - from the literal to the mystical, from the analogical[9] to the hagiographical - we explore this kaleidoscope, always rich, always speaking to us.

Our hope as Christians is that we can reach beyond the merely intellectual understanding to the heart of Faith. This is because the gospels, like all we receive in Scripture and Tradition, are our 'food for the journey' in this life.

There are many techniques learned over the centuries to help us: *lectio divina*[10], the *examen*[11], imaginative prayer and - most simply - study. We will explore these more deeply in our final session. There is no *one* way to approach the gospels.

Ultimately, these texts are given to serve us and we each will find our own best ways of taking and chewing (*accipite et manducate* (take and eat - or 'chew') to use the words of the Roman Missal) their richness to help and sustain us as we travel along the road of our lives.

The dangers of literalism or fundamentalism

If we fail to recognise the multi-faceted qualities of the scriptural texts we run the danger of misunderstanding the truth of the Word spoken to us: a word or a phrase torn out of its context - either structurally or historically - can lead us to misinterpret what we read and to mis-apply their teaching.

All words, spoken or written, have their historical context because we all live in a world governed by time and change. Words understood one way in the past have altered meaning - or have no translatable meaning - in our language of today. Think of words like

[8] 2 Timothy 3:16-17

[9] This refers to finding similarities between the given text and other texts or scriptural ideas

[10] 'holy reading'

[11] 'examination of conscience'

'gay' as simply meaning 'happy' or 'lovely', or the modern understanding of words like 'sick' or 'cool'. Language and meaning change.

Literalism and fundamentalism[12] drive us further into this changing, mutable world: like a hall of mirrors, we find reflected back at us our own preoccupations and prejudices.

The Catholic Interpretation of Scripture

The Catholic understanding is that we always need to question our assumptions: Are my own preoccupations or prejudices distorting my understanding? Can I really understand the full depth of scripture *on my own?* Am I not better relying on the teaching and tradition of others more skilled in interpretation and on the generations of understanding which precede me?

There is always room for our own personal journey of understanding, but the Catholic way is to understand that **we are not alone.** The help, experience, guidance and teaching of others helps us *together* to understand the rich depth of scripture as a whole and the gospels in particular. We seek, in prayer and in our shared life, to journey *together* in faith, love and understanding towards our hope in the coming kingdom of God in Christ, which we recognise as Heaven.

A Brief History of Exegesis

At the beginning of the 20th century the study of scripture took a radical turn, first in the protestant churches but then in Catholicism: the Word of God in Scripture could be understood not only as holy text to be revered and contemplated, but could be recognised as historical text to be explored and interrogated.

We have wonderful Catholic scholars who have examined the gospel texts and brought new light to our understanding - not least among them Raymond E. Brown, who did so much to bring Catholic understanding to the structure and meaning of the written texts handed down to us.

Their insights, together with those of the great theologians of the late 20th century, fed into and guided the reflections of the Church Fathers present at the Second Vatican Council.[13] You can explore their insights in *Dei Verbum* and other Council documents.[14]

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[12] Modern Christian fundamentalism arose from American millenarian sects of the 19th century, and has become associated with reaction against social and political liberalism and rejection of the theory of evolution

[13] 1962-1965

[14] See *Exploring Vatican II*, https://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/education/our-faith/learning-about-our-faith/resources-2/exploring-vatican-ii-2/

The discipline of these scholars is known as *exegesis*: the drawing-out of meaning from the scriptural text. It will help to guide us as we explore the gospel texts.

A Warning against Eisegesis

We should be careful, however, of the inverse of exegesis: the reading-*into* scripture of our own preoccupations and prejudices, known as **eisegesis**.

Our discussion of literalism and fundamentalism has already highlighted this danger (giving meaning to our own ideas rather than being open to the Word of God). We see the problem of *eisegesis* played out again and again in the use of scripture to 'prove' a point (for example, in the past, in the justification of slavery, and today in the condemnation of people who seem different from ourselves, often minorities).

We must always approach the scriptures in humility, recognising both our gifts and our limitations and recognising that the Truth of the Spirit, which Jesus promised, abides not in us as individuals - even the Pope! - but in us all *together* as Church.

We seek understanding - *fides quaerens intellectum* ('faith seeking understanding'), as Augustine[15] and Anselm of Canterbury[16] taught. We travel together as Church, one in Faith and Love, in each age seeking to grasp the meaning and depths of God's Word given to us in Christ.

[15] 354-430CE

[16] 1033-1109CE