

Study 17: Herald the Good News

Gospel: The Good News.

In our studies so far we have traced the working out of God's plan for our happiness. We have seen the highlights of this great work of restoration – the restoration of our friendship with God – in the pages of the Old Testament. We now turn to a study of the New Testament where we will read of the culmination of God's saving work, the ultimate *act of God*: the life, death and resurrection of the Man-God, Jesus Christ.

As Catholic Christians we're all familiar with the word, "gospel", and tend to regard the four Gospels as four biographies of Jesus. But this is really not a very accurate appraisal of the writings of the four evangelists, who didn't really intend to write works comparable to modern historical biographies. Indeed, we shall discover that the term *gospel* has a much broader meaning than we might at first expect. Our four evangelists viewed their individual efforts at a written gospel as part of a vast stream of gospel preaching and tradition. So we will first establish just what the evangelists meant when they spoke of the "gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

In the Old Testament, *gospel* (or *good news*) signified the announcement of one of God's mighty saving acts on behalf of His chosen people. For example, see *Isaiah 40:9-11*:

"Go up onto a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; Cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm..."

In these acts of rescue God reveals His presence and His care for His people. God always revealed Himself to His people in some event of history – for example, the exodus of the Jews from their Egyptian captivity -- and He revealed Himself as the "One Who Saves" his people.

In the New Testament the gospel is also concerned with a historical event; indeed, the supreme event of all human history. For most of us, *gospel* means one of the four written accounts by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. But when we look more closely at the titles of the four Gospels, we see they are referred to as the *Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*. What we really have, then, are four witnesses to a *single event* or, rather, a series of events called "the Gospel." And so our four Gospels are actually four interpretations of the meaning of the great saving activity of the Son of God on our behalf. Instead of saying, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. Matthew," we could just as well say, "The Rescue of Humanity by Jesus Christ as described and interpreted by St. Matthew."

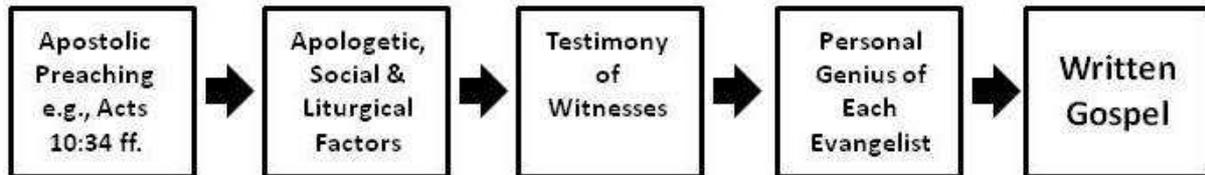
The Spoken Gospel.

The first announcement of the "good news of salvation" was not the written Gospels, but the preaching of Jesus and that of the Apostles. Only later, and only gradually, did the gospel take on written form. Our task now is to study some of these apostolic sermons in order to understand the main outline of Jesus' saving activity. Understanding this outline will be particularly valuable when we come to study the written Gospels, for in composing their Gospels the four evangelists followed this outline faithfully. It's also important to recognize that their selection of events from the life and teaching of Jesus was influenced by the need to respond to the various objections of Jewish and pagan audiences. The problems arising from the everyday lives of the new Christian communities demanded attention as well. We must also recognize that portions of Our Lord's life had already been preserved through the prayers of the liturgy, which provided the evangelists with ready-made accounts; for example, of the Last Supper and the Passion of Christ.

Do not conclude from this that the evangelists were simply collectors or editors of other people's material. On the contrary, each was a true author in his own right, as their work makes abundantly clear. Each has his own style, his own overall plan, his own point of view, and areas of particular concern. Each made use of the materials available to him, whether in written form or in the living tradition of the

Church. The latter could include the Church's preaching and liturgy as well as the personal testimony of Jesus' contemporaries. In the case of John and Matthew the evangelists themselves were eye-witnesses, while Mark and Luke certainly had direct access to many who were. (Mark, for example, was a companion of Peter.)

The following diagram is a simple – perhaps too simple – depiction of the process by which the authors of the four Gospels selected their material:



The *apologetic factor* relates to the major difficulties faced by prospective converts and involves the concern of the Church to preserve the authoritative statements of Jesus as well as the Old Testament prophecies and references to the Messiah and His mission (e.g., *Isaiah 50-55* and the *Psalms*). It also accounts for the prominence given to the controversies between Jesus and the leaders of the Jews (see *Mark 2:15 – 3:6*).

The *social factor* involves the need to address the problems of everyday Christianity. It was probably responsible, at least to some extent, for the inclusion of those Gospel passages that are sometimes called, “pronouncement passages”; that is, episodes that preserve some saying of Jesus that is particularly relevant to the solution of a problem of practical Christian living (see *Luke 9:57-62*).

The *liturgical factor* describes the process by which the Church preserved many of the events of Christ's life in her prayers and hymns. It illustrates how, very early in the life of the Church, Christians began incorporating accounts of the key events of Jesus' life into the Church's worship. It is highly probable that such liturgical material had a real influence on the Passion narratives found in our four Gospels (see, for example, *John 13-21*).

Apostolic Preaching.

For the moment, however, we are concerned mainly with the first attempts of the apostles to carry out the command Jesus gave them to “preach the gospel to every creature.” Fortunately, St. Luke preserved several examples of these early sermons in the *Acts of the Apostles*. When Matthew and the other evangelists composed their accounts of the good news of salvation, they had a concise outline to follow, that of early apostolic preaching. And so, in order to develop an understanding of the general content and direction of the four written gospels, it will be useful first to examine and familiarize ourselves with the “spoken Gospel” that we encounter in *Acts*.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:

Acts 2:14-39 – Peter's sermon on Pentecost

Acts 3:12-26 – Peter's sermon after healing the lame man

Acts 4:8-12 – Peter's sermon to the Sanhedrin

Acts 10:34-43 – Peter's sermon at Cornelius' baptism

Acts 13:16-41 – Paul's sermon at Antioch

Acts 17:16-34 – Paul's sermon at Athens

Behind the Words.

Preach the Gospel to Every Creature. In these pages of *Acts* we see the Apostles carrying out the commandment of Christ. At first glance, these sermons may seem unrelated, but a closer study reveals a recurring pattern, a similar theme followed in each. This central pattern or theme is the good news of salvation or “gospel” and can be summarized as follows:

1. The preacher announces the dawn of the *messianic age* and the fulfillment of the prophetic message of the Old Testament with the appearance of Jesus. The witness of John the Baptist and the people of Israel is provided as proof to support this claim.
2. The preacher gives a relatively brief account of the public ministry of Jesus, as well as His death and resurrection, explaining that the longer-for messianic age has been inaugurated by the events of actual history.
3. He proclaims the exaltation of the risen Christ at the right hand of the Father, as the head of the New Israel, the Church.
4. He points to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as the sign of Christ’s active presence in the Church and His continuing care for it.
5. The listeners are told that Christ is to come again to accomplish the final consummation of His rule.
6. The listeners are called to repentance and offered forgiveness in the name of Jesus. The saving acts of God in history always demand a response, calling the people to act on what they have heard.

Among the passages included in the above readings, there is one exception to this process: the sermon Paul gives in Athens. After reading all six passages, see if you can determine why Paul approached the Athenians differently.

This theme is brought out more clearly in the table on the following page.

The Church of the New Testament.

It’s important to note that when the Church began her mission not a single line of the New Testament had been written. Jesus Christ had commanded His disciples to spread the Gospel to every nation (See *Mt 28:19-20*) and, impelled by the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost, the Apostles immediately began their task (See *Acts 2*). Only later and gradually did our New Testament begin to appear. First came various letters from that busy missionary, St. Paul. His letters were written primarily to address the pressing practical problems of the local churches he had founded throughout the Roman Empire. The four Gospels were written to offer an authentic witness to the meaning of the events that formed God’s saving action through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through our readings from *Acts* we have seen, if only briefly, that our New Testament grew out of the daily activity of the Church as she went about her mission of carrying the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

Key Passages. Keep in mind that your Bible is a book you will return to every day, so don’t hesitate to mark or underline key passages, to write notes in the margins, to make the message of the Bible your own. With this in mind, mark the following sections of *Acts*:

Acts 2-4: Early scenes at Jerusalem.

- *Acts 2:14-39 – Peter proclaims the Gospel.* The Church began her mission of proclaiming the good news or gospel on the occasion of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, some seven weeks after Jesus was crucified. The Holy Spirit chose a most appropriate day, for under the Old Covenant it was a day which marked the giving of the Law and the creation of Israel as God’s People, the forerunner of the Church. Pentecost means “fiftieth” in Greek and was used popularly for the feast in much the same way we say “fourth” for our Independence Day.

Preaching Theme	Acts 2:14-39	Acts 3: 12-26	Acts 4:8-12	Acts 10:34-43	Acts 13:16-41
Fulfillment	"No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel..."	"...but God has thus brought to fulfillment what he had announced beforehand through the mouth of all the prophets..."		"You know the word (that) he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all..."	"...they fulfilled the oracles of the prophets that are read Sabbath after Sabbath."
Jesus' Mission & Death	"Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him."	"You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. The author of life you put to death..."	"...in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified..."	"...what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and (in) Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree."	"...they asked Pilate to have him put to death..."
Resurrection	"But God raised him up... Exalted at the right hand of God..."	"...the God of our ancestors, has glorified his servant Jesus..."	"...whom God raised from the dead..."	"This man God raised (on) the third day..."	"But God raised him from the dead..."
Holy Spirit	"...he received the promise of the holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you (both) see and hear..."	"...why do you look so intently at us as if we had made him walk by our own power or piety?"	"...Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answered them..."	"While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word."	
Second Coming		"...Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the times of universal restoration..."		"...he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead."	
Response	"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit."	"Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away..."	"There is no salvation through anyone else..."	"To him all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name."	"...through him forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you...(and) in him every believer is justified."

The third hour would be about 9 a.m. and it was customary among the Jews to fast each day until this time. This custom explains the force of Peter's defense against the charge of drunkenness. The apostles, being observant Jews, would have had nothing to eat, much less drink, since the previous evening.

The prophet, Joel, whom St. Peter quotes (see *Joel 2:28-32*), lived in the southern kingdom, Judah, prior to the Babylonian Exile. His book consists of warnings of the Lord's impending judgment, the *Day of the Lord*, a day of terror for the wicked, but for the just, a glorious day. It will be a day when the repentant will receive the Spirit of the Lord. Peter quoted this familiar passage to announce to the crowd that the longed-for day had indeed arrived. The Messiah had come to save His People.

This sermon of Peter is the very earliest example of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Compare it with the outline given in the table and you will find it contains most of the six elements of Gospel preaching.

- *Acts 3:12-26 – A sermon on Solomon's Porch.* The context of this sermon by St. Peter is the healing of a lame man on the Temple steps (*Acts 3:1-12*). This miracle, and the provocative sermon that follows it, lead to the first serious clash between the infant Church and the Jewish religious authorities. The "beautiful gate" was the Nicanor Gate, the eastern gate of the Temple buildings proper. It opened onto Solomon's Porch, a portico where crowds often gathered when coming or going from Temple services. For Peter's reference to Jesus as "servant" see *Isaiah 52:13*. Notice too how Peter's sermon follows the pattern of primitive Christian preaching described above.
- *Acts 4:8-12 – Preaching the Gospel before the Sanhedrin.* The rapid growth of the early Christian community alarmed the Jewish religious authorities. So far they had taken no action and had probably considered the apostles to be deluded fanatics who would likely soon disappear. It's significant that the first opponents of Christianity were the priestly class, the Sadducees, who held political power in the Jewish community and whose primary motive was probably political expediency. When they called the Apostles before the tribunal, the Sadducees likely feared them more as political disturbers of the public peace than as teachers of false doctrine. St. Peter's reference to Christ as the "stone rejected by the builders" is a quotation from *Psalms 118:22* (see also *Isaiah 28:16*).

Acts 10: Peter and the conversion of Cornelius

- *Acts 10:1-11:18 – The conversion of the Gentile Cornelius.* Here we encounter a critical episode in the life of the early Church, the first instance of the administration of Baptism to a Gentile, an uncircumcised pagan. At this time Caesarea was the Roman capital of the province of Judea. The "cohort called the Italica" referred to was most likely the Second Corps, which was drawn principally from Italian freedmen and is known to have been stationed in Syria at about this time. "Devout and God-fearing" is a technical term used by the Jews for those Gentiles who had accepted the teachings of Judaism and become loose adherents of the Synagogue without going as far as submitting to the rite of circumcision.

Acts 13: Paul's First Missionary Journey

- *Acts 13:16-41 – Paul's Sermon at Antioch.* The conversion of Cornelius might well be considered the climax of the first phase of the early Church's history. With this event the Church launched her saving mission to all of humanity. In this sermon by Paul at Antioch we encounter a typical example of Paul's preaching of the *Good News of Salvation*. This was how Paul preached as he journeyed throughout the Roman Empire; and it was Paul who, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, would take the lead in bringing to the Gentiles the saving mission of the Church. Compare this sermon with those of Peter and notice how faithful Paul is to the Gospel outline described above.

Unity of the Two Testaments.

The above examples of the proclamation of the Good News of salvation bear a striking witness to the organic unity of the Old and New Testaments. The sermons are filled with direct quotations and indirect allusions to the sacred writings of the Jewish people. Peter, for example, in his proclamation of the Gospel, quotes directly from *Psalms 16* and *132* and from the prophets *Joel* and *Isaiah*. At some point scan the footnotes in your Bible that relate to the sermons we have read and note the number of Old Testament references. This is true not only of *Acts*, but of every book of the New Testament.

Because these sermons are filled with references to the Holy Spirit and the Resurrection, it's not surprising to find them prominently included in the Church's liturgies for the Easter Season and for Pentecost, times when the Church pays special attention to those who are newly baptized. The Church reminds these new Christians that God has showered them with His grace and highlights the role the Holy Spirit will play in their sanctification.

Doers of the Word.

When the Jews and pagans who were touched by the Holy Spirit first heard the proclamation of the Gospel, they experienced a deep sense of liberation and joy. This triumphant joy took possession of the very heart of the Church as it looked forward to the final triumph of God, a triumph that would be achieved through the valiant witness of his disciples in all ages. As Christians, we, too, should experienced this same joy and let it overcome all the discouragement that the world places in our path. The realization of what God has done and is doing within us and for us can be a remarkably stabilizing force, and a source of true joy and confidence.

As Christians we are all called to share in the Church's work of spreading the Gospel to all of humanity. Every day each of us encounters those who have not heard the Good News. Be on the lookout for opportunities to share the Gospel with others. Don't hide the light of our Faith under a bushel basket, for by doing so we ignore our God-given vocation as heralds of the Gospel.

Questions:

1. In his sermon on Pentecost why did Peter emphasize "the set plan and foreknowledge of God" (*Acts 2:23*)? Do St. Paul's comments in *Philippians 2:5-11* throw any light on Peter's remark?
2. Read our Lord's parable of the vinedressers (*Mark 12:1-11*) and discuss any connections between it and the Apostles' sermons.
3. Why did the Apostles place so much emphasis on the fact that they witnessed the events they describe? (In this connection read *Acts 1:16-26*)
4. Why did Paul include the long passage on the history of Israel in his address at Antioch (*Acts 13:16-23*)?
5. Why were the four evangelists so careful to follow the outline of the *spoken Gospel* when they eventually wrote their Gospels?
6. Compare these sermons from *Acts* with *Joshua 24:1-24*. What similarities to you see?