**HIS STORY – MESSAGE 1 THE GOSPELS**

Have you ever wondered why we have four gospels? Have you ever compared their differences and wondered why God wanted four different people to write them? We are getting ahead of ourselves! Today we start a new series in which we take a whole book of the Bible each week and teach its essential message and see how its ties into the big picture of what we call God’s Word. We are going to start with the New Testament – just 27 books.

Some of them written from prison by Paul the Apostle. Others written by followers of Jesus like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Incidentally, do you know who wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else? Luke! Over the coming weeks, we are going to discover how diverse this Bible really is and what the essential message of each book is and why it's in the Bible.

Today we are going to cover the four Gospels. That’s right – all four gospels in one Sunday. So, tighten up your seat belt…and let’s go! What we often forget is that what we believe – is first of all history! Our faith is based in historical events, in the life teachings and person of Jesus who breathed lived and walked the streets of Jerusalem and Galilee. This hits you powerfully when you walk around Israel today, this is their history. What we believe is not based on the teaching of some esoteric mystical guru, but real-life events of history. God came to us to tell us what he is like and what he asks of us.

And the gospels are the record of the earthly life of Jesus. If you want to find the teachings of Jesus – they are in the gospels. If you want to track the life journey of Jesus from birth to death and resurrection – they are in the gospels. There is a progression of the story from birth in the opening chapters to death and resurrection at end of the gospels. If you want to discover the purpose of Jesus coming to earth and his great passion for lost human beings – it is in the gospels. Stories like; the prodigal son, the lost sheep and the kingdom parables show a newly emergent people of God that are neither Jew nor Gentile but a mix of every nation in the World – it’s in the gospels. So this morning I want to ask the question: Why four gospels and what do they each tell us that is unique? Let’s look at the four gospels.

**MATTHEW – Jesus - The King is Here!**

A Jewish tax collector who encountered Jesus and became a follower wrote the first gospel. It’s the most Jewish of the four gospels and links the New to the Old Testament. It is Matthew who makes the transition by showing how Jesus fulfilled what was predicted long ago, he is the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke. So Matthew looks backwards and makes sense of the transition of Jesus from his roots in the nation of Israel.

Matthew has much of the teachings of Jesus in his gospel. There are five main blocks of it. So Matthews’s gospel could be summed up – The King is coming! He proclaims Jesus as the king of a new group who are not Jewish nor Gentiles – but followers of Jesus who declared – I came the save the world of people despite their skin colour, race, history, religion and culture. It’s a very radical message because it's inclusive, yet clearly Matthew is writing to Jewish believer’s. It is Jesus who can break down the barriers we erect, it is the gospels that can bridge chasms of hatred and evil and ethnic violence. It is only coming under the rule and reign of King Jesus that there is hope for nations to live in harmony.

What Matthew tells us is that the King has come….he is here. Repent and turn your mind towards following the King's way. Turn from your rebellion towards the Father and be radically changed to relate to one another and receive a new way of thinking and living. That’s the message of Matthew. But I thought the gospel was about turning from sin to secure a home in heaven? No, God might say that a consumer construction of truth that misreads the fuller story. Yes, people come to God and turn from sin and believe in Christ – but all these gospels tell us that true spiritual rebirth is a lifestyle of radical daily choice here and now. Matthew tells us that many people who think they are in the Kingdom may not be. The Kingdom of God changes you from within. That’s Matthews own story, he saw the connection of Jesus to what Isaiah spoke 750 years before, he quoted many verses showing Jesus fulfilled what was prophesied. And he ends his gospel with Go then….make disciples of every tribe and tongue….bringing them under the reign of Jesus. The King has come – he is the Messiah!

**MARK – Jesus The Suffering Servant**

His name was John Mark, a young man who followed Jesus and had a disagreement with Apostle Paul who didn’t want him on his team when he went visiting churches in Asia Minor.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and most likely the earliest of the four. But where Matthew focusses on Jesus the King, Mark’s profile or picture of Jesus is of a servant who came to suffer and save people. Whereas Matthew’s gospel will target Jewish believers, Mark’s gospel is written to convince his Roman audience about who Jesus was. Marks gospel begins and ends abruptly, it is blunt to the point and tells the story as an eyewitness would of Jesus’ life. We think that Mark has gained much of his material from spending time with Peter. Mark’s favourite word is ‘immediately’ – it occurs multiple times in his book. So what is it about Mark that is unique? I think it’s the story of his own comeback – as he came to see that being a follower of Jesus was not going to be an easy comfortable life.

Mark through his story reminds us that the pathway of following Jesus is not going to be about the good life with little pain or problems, free of trouble and blessed with great health and financial abundance. Somehow following Jesus, we become also candidates for some of his pain and suffering. It’s a gospel message that is not preached nor received so well these days. I’m not grabbed by this nor excited at the idea that my path might have some rocks on it. Mark was raised in a home, his mother was Mary. One day Peter shows up at his home after he was freed from prison where he was awaiting execution Acts 12:1-9, and Something was stirred in Mark. He went on Paul’s first missionary journey where he observed powerful demonstrations of the Kingdom but also experienced hardship and danger. And here is what happened – Mark begins to think, this is not what I signed up for. He struggled to face the harsh realities of life as a follower of Jesus. Mark’s gospel portrays Jesus as a suffering servant – and Mark learned deeply that to be a follower of Jesus was not a comfortable life, he learned this as he travelled with Peter and later welcomed Paul on his journey. He planted the first Church in Egypt but was martyred for his faith. Mark reminds us that we all need to face up to the reality that following Jesus will mean a life of being a servant.

**LUKE – Jesus the Exhibit of the Fathers Love**

The third portrait of Jesus comes from Luke, a doctor and historian. It is the longest of the gospels, and Luke starts by telling us why he wrote this, it was to tell the accurate story of Jesus. Luke has a strong focus on the cost of following Jesus. He speaks to us as though our hearts are divided and constantly living in a battle to choose to follow the right path. We say we want to follow Christ and be like him but the reality of this is a struggle. Instead, we find ourselves wanting to find significance and happiness in other things. Our hearts are divided and we stand at the crossroads of life needing to choose the way of the cross. It's Dr Luke and his gospel that drives home this profile of Jesus in his gospel. Time and time again Luke portrays the Father’s love and always connects this to Jerusalem and the cross. While Matthew calls us to follow Christ as King, and how we are to live as citizens of this new kingdom. Mark calls us to follow Christ as a suffering servant and to forgo our entitlements. But Luke calls us to maturity, of being shaped like Jesus by choosing to follow him as Lord, our hearts being conquered by the Fathers love. Luke was not a Jew he was Greek – and he wrote to Theophilus an account of the most perfect person he had discovered, whose name is Jesus. You see by now the gospel had started to penetrate the Roman world. It had burst out of the Jewish bubble where it had been born and it’s no accident that one of the gospels needed to be written by someone with a context right outside Jewish roots. Remember this gospel is for all the world, all of the people, and all of the cultures – it is only the gospel that can bridge the divides we create, smash down the prejudice and bring reconciliation where before there was enmity. Time and time again when you read Luke you will find him appealing to followers of Jesus to be unequivocal in their daily lives, non-compromising and presenting this argument that to be fully human and to fully reach our potential as human beings we are to live in relationship with our Creator.

How deep the Fathers love is …Luke’s gospel. Look at the way Luke portrays the story of Jesus’ baptism. As he was praying in chapter 3.21, the Fathers pleasure declared, Jesus surrendered to the calling of the Father. All done inside a very human body for our sake.

But it’s a love that will sacrifice all for others, a costly kindy of love. Then the references to fulfilling the purposes of the Father – seven times Luke records that this would mean going to Jerusalem to die in Chapters; 13.22, 17.11, 18.31, 19.11, 28 and 37. There are more than 24 stories in Luke that are not in Matthew or Mark – each one depicts something of how the perfect human being will act when facing terrible pain – he loves perfectly and deeply at significant personal cost because burning inside him is the Fathers love for a lost world. Luke has 13 women in his gospel that appear nowhere else. Luke has a powerful emphasis upon the poor, destitute and marginalised. Luke has the strongest stories and account of healing and power encounter. It is Luke that tells us to wait for Holy Spirit to clothe them from on high. It looks like an impossible request doesn’t it? That’s why we need the last of the four portraits of Jesus written by John.

**JOHN – Jesus the I AM**

Jesus the I AM. The Way, the Truth and the Life! Bread of Life, Water of Life, Light of the world.

John reminds us by the way he wrote his gospel that the deepest needs we have will never be met by things we possess or aspire to become but by being loved. John reminds us that knowing God is not about how blessed we are, how much we have, or even how much we know, it’s about letting the love of God live through you.

John’s gospel is indescribable – look beneath – look deeper. It doesn’t just contain the facts about Jesus but it takes them and teaches the meaning behind the history. E.g. Samaritan woman at well – history but it means something – the story goes somewhere and calls for a response.

John reminds us in his gospel of four things that only he tells:

* Christ was with the Father before he was born, John 1.18.
* Jesus came to reveal what he had seen, heard and experienced in relationship with the trinity. What we see in the life of Jesus is a reflection of God, only by tuning into that and being born of that life John 3….can we start to truly live.
* Jesus confronted and challenged every other life philosophy. Real-life would mean suffering and self-giving.
* Many who were captivated by Jesus and drawn to him – turned away and could not face up to the pathway to true life when they realised it would be costly.

So, which is the four gospels is the true one? Why is their four? Because we need them all!

Origen’s great quote from the fourth century, “there are not four gospels – there is one fourfold gospel.” No one gospel could portray the full story, let me illustrate using a famous painting. You see we need to look deeper than just a surface. Let me show you Rembrandt's famous painting of “The Return of the Prodigal” What do you see? Fathers eyes, hands, the prodigals feet, the older brother…..

**Every book in the Bible is a love letter from God to you….**

**Matthew** – I am King! Live life by being led by the King. A tax collector turned follower of Jesus. Calls us to live a lifestyle that makes no sense to the watching world. Focus on the Kingdom coming to earth now and later. **Mark** –I am a Suffering Servant. Live by sacrificing personal comfort that enables you to serve others. Mark who once failed publicly somehow became captivated by Jesus and tells of a way to do life by serving others. **Luke** – I am the Father's Heart, Who chose to pay it forward for the Father’s purposes and calls us to radical discipleship following Him. Who presents a picture of freedom and healing for the poor, lost and the least. We will see more about this next week in the book of Acts also written by him.

**John** – I am the divine Life. The deepest way to do life is to love and be loved. To go deeper than superficial and immerse yourself into the Father. So what about you? What do you see in these four portraits of Jesus’ life and teachings? Which of these resonates powerfully to you? Not one reflection of Jesus is sufficient. But God chose four people; a reformed Jewish tax collector, a failure, a Greek doctor and a beloved follower to tell the story of Jesus.

We call them the four gospels. But all four say to us – Now what will you do with this Jesus? You can ignore him, reject him, but best of all you can embrace him and the four sparkling accounts of his life.