

## **WHERE DID THE GOSPELS COME FROM?**

- The Gospel is at the heart of our faith. It is our guide, the basis for our tradition and our teaching as Christians. How did the Gospel come to be handed down to us in its present form? Why are there four gospels? We take a look at the beginnings of the gospels as we know them today.
- For the first thirty-five years after Jesus' death, the gospels and the New Testament didn't exist. Why was that? What was happening during those first days of the Church?
- As long as the apostles were still alive there was no thought of a written book. The apostles had lived with Christ, they had known him intimately. They had seen him live, die and rise from the dead. In fact, they have been described as the "living books" on which the Christian message was written.
  1. There were other reasons too,
  2. The age in which the first Christians lived was a non-literary one. Mass-produced printing was a long way off.
  3. A single sheet of papyrus cost more than a man's daily wage.
  4. The first Christians were, for the most part, poor and uncultured. They could not read.
  5. The Jews preferred to commit knowledge to memory rather than write it down.

Those first thirty-five years however, were not years of inactivity, for over this period the gospels were beginning to take shape in a very real way. There were three stages in this process:

### **STAGE 1**

#### **THE LIFE OF JESUS**

- When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God became man. The men and women who saw Jesus Christ, saw in a way they could understand, what God was really like. But from the beginning, he called some of his followers to be special observers, special witnesses of these important years - the apostles.
- They saw him show compassion to the poor and the sinner. They saw him heal the sick. They heard him speak in a simple language that everyone could understand. They were the special witnesses. They knew that Jesus Christ had come to bring a message of salvation to all men and women.

### **STAGE 2**

#### **THE PREACHING OF THE APOSTLES**

- "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation." The apostles were now well equipped to carry out this last command of Jesus, and like him, they did it in a simple manner.
- Their intimate knowledge of Christ meant they could give their hearers a vivid picture of his life and teaching. They could describe his miracles in minute

detail and repeat his stories and teaching accurately. But that was not enough.

- Gradually, the apostles put their knowledge of Jesus into an orderly scheme. In their preaching they grouped miracles and parables together in some kind of order.
- They selected parables which urged their listeners to follow Christ. And so we can see an important fact emerging about the formation of the gospels.
- Even before the first gospels were written, the life and teaching of Jesus was being put into an accepted order. And this was being done by the apostles, those who really knew Christ.

### **STAGE 3**

#### **THE EVANGELISTS**

- The Jewish memory was extremely retentive. We cannot easily forget repetitive TV adverts because the order of the words is always the same. The same was true of the early Jewish converts.
- Once the apostles had grouped the miracles, teaching and parables of Jesus into a set order, their listeners would not easily forget. The words of the apostles would be firmly imprinted in their memory. This helps us to understand the part played by the gospel writers.
- They did not write a book in the sense that we speak of a modern author writing a book. They put into writing

that which was at first passed on by word of mouth. Their work - and this is their great gift to us - brings us into direct contact with the preaching of the apostles, the official witnesses of the Life of Jesus.

#### **TRADITION**

- "Tradition" has to do with handing on the inspired message and interpreting it in the spirit in which it was written.
- There were many other writings both about the Jews and about Jesus which the early church excluded from the Bible. They judged these to be non-sacred or "non-inspired". This official selection was possible because the Christian community was conscious that the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus had promised to send them, was guiding them:
- *I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, however, he will guide you to all truth (John 16:12-13)*
- That guidance of the church by the Spirit to form, to preserve and to grow in understanding the Old and New Testaments in order to shepherd God's people in truth and love is what we call "Tradition".
- The Spirit's abiding presence has enabled the Christian community throughout the centuries to say, "This is in sync with our faith - "this isn't".