

starter

four gospels

AIMS

To consider the four gospels, their similarities and differences.

INTRODUCTION

In the New Testament we have four written down version of Jesus' life we call the Four Gospels. We usually identify these by the name of the writer to which they are attributed. Each gospel has its own character and content, and whilst there is obviously some overlap of the key aspects of the story like Jesus' death and resurrection, some parts of the story are specific to one gospel only. In this starter we get an opportunity to explore what we think about these similarities and differences.

Background information

Each of the four Gospel writers is traditionally represented by the following symbols, which originate from the four "living creatures" of the [Book of Ezekiel](#) (Chapter 1) and the [Book of Revelation](#) (4.6-9 and following). These appear in ancient manuscripts, such as in the Book of Kells. The figures are always winged. [Matthew](#) is symbolised by a [human](#) (not an angel as sometimes thought); [Mark](#) by a [lion](#); [Luke](#) by an ox bull or calf; John by an [eagle](#). A DVD of the Book of Kells is available from <http://www.bookofkells.com/>. You may want to use some pictures as a background to this activity.

An activity like this might go well for Bible Sunday which this year falls on October 25th.

Getting started

We suggest that participants work in small groups so that they can work together collaboratively and confidently. How many small groups will depend on how many participants are together. Try to have about 6 people in a group.

STRUCTURE

1. Give each group a large sheet of paper (from a flip chart for example) and ask them to fold it into four quarters. On each quarter write one of the names associated with the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
2. Invite participants to put what they remember about each gospel in each quarter. Encourage them to do this without looking at written bibles, at least at first. It is not a test but a chance to share knowledge. Encourage the group members to share their ideas and to listen to each other. Try to remind people not to dominate the group but to be respectful of each person's contributions. Spend about 10 minutes on this remembering.
3. Give out some written Bibles. Try to have different versions that have words of introduction to each book of the Bible at the beginning of each one. Invite the groups to consider what these say about the gospels and to add or amend their lists about Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the light of this information. They may also want to check up any of the things from their rememberings and add to or amend those. Spend about 15 minutes on this part of the activity.
4. Bring the groups back together. Invite participants to say which gospel they prefer and why. Each group might want to vote for their favourite gospel. Encourage them to refer to the things they have on their sheets to inform their choice. Spend about 5 minutes on this.

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CLOSING WORSHIP

Close the session with some worship and prayer. You may want to choose a hymn that reflects something of the diversity of the gospels or a poem about them. At the end of this document a series of poems about the gospels has been provided. You may want to use these or write your own.

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more Starters please return to the Menu. As this Bible Year is the lectionary year for Marks gospel there will be a series of Bible studies on the gospel of Mark on the website. Why not try one of those next? Alternatively if you would like to try an all-age creative activity which could focus on the gospels, why not try Bible Scrapbooking on the dessert menu.

POEMS ON THE FOUR GOSPELS

Mark

Mark, the first of the gospel writers,
Starts his good news as he means to go on,
States his intent at the beginning,
To show Jesus Christ as God's own son.

The winged lion makes straight for the desert,
John the Baptist is preaching there,
Baptises Jesus who goes to be tempted,
Then attended by angels' care.

Mark always brief, clear of purpose.
Friend of Peter, who told him facts,
Makes his point with many stories
Of Jesus' words and healing acts.

Mark alone adds vivid detail -
Other ships are on the lake
When the great storm alarms the disciples
So that they call for Jesus to wake.

Only in Mark do the five thousand
Sit themselves on grass that is green,
Not poor shrivelled drought-ridden stuff
But a living symbol that seems to mean

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The tired and weary famished crowd
Are about to be amazed and fed
By five little loaves and two tiny fish,
Blessed for them by the living Bread.

So St. Mark in writing his gospel
Reveals to the reader holy things
As his lion prowls upon the earth
And rises to heaven upheld by strong wings.

Matthew

Matthew the man
With wings,
But not an angel,
Reformed tax collector,
Used to lists,
Organizing material,
Teaching cause and effect,
Particularly the effect,
The inevitable hard consequences
Of stepping into sin,
Weeping and wailing,
Gnashing of teeth,
Fires of damnation
For foolish virgins and goats.
Starts his gospel with the man
Joseph, not Mary,
Joseph's genealogy.
Joseph's decision,
The visit of the Magi,
The slaughter of the innocents,
The flight into Egypt,
Tough stuff.
Matthew gives us warning
He is not an easy read.
The good news of Jesus
Has its hard edges.

Luke

Luke, the sacrificial, winged bull,
Starts in the Temple with incense rising.

Luke the Greek, the beloved physician,
Careful historian, checking his facts
Concerned for the poor, the sick, the outcast
Like his master; recording his acts.
Healing the leper, the woman bent double,
The centurion's servant, the paralysed man,
Raising from death Jairus's daughter.

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Restoring to life the widow's one son.
He shows Jesus teaching and preaching and telling
Compassionate tales of the strayed and the lost
The coin and the sheep and the father's young son,
The joy that abounded when they were found;
The lonely traveller set on by thieves
Befriended and tended with love and with care
Of the stranger who could not let him lie there
Wounded and bleeding ignored by the priest.

Luke tells of betrayal, the cross and the tomb,
The road to Emmaus where two sunk in gloom
Are joined by their Lord raised up from the dead
At last to be known in the breaking of bread.

Luke ends in the Temple with praising the Lord,
The bull opens his wings and flies heavenward.

John

John, the eagle
On the mountain top,
Looking at the sun
Unblinded by God's glory,
Holy evangelist.

Yet John is a man,
Looking at Jesus;
Seeing another man
Making friends
Enjoying a wedding feast,
Turning traders out of the Temple,
Sought out by night,
For secret talks;
Seeking the despised,
Healing the sick, feeding the hungry,
Raising the three-day dead
(A difficult one that)
A man of compassion.

The eagle swoops for food,
Feeds its young;
John lights on Jesus' words
To feed the believer.
Jesus is:
The bread of life,
The light of the world,
The good shepherd,
The true vine,
The way, the truth, the life.

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Words from the Word
That John saw made flesh
And living among us.

Acknowledgements

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