

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Gospel

*Gospel*, as you probably know, means *good news*; it is the direct translation into Old English of the Greek *euangelion*. As a special sort of writing, Gospels appear to have been invented especially for the Christian Church, possibly by whoever wrote the one we call “according to Mark”.

### Biographies?

If the Four Gospels we find in the Bible were four *biographies*, they would be very different works. For one thing, they would have co-ordinated their facts a lot more from an historical point of view. We can see a great deal of agreement at the end of Jesus’ life, where all Four tell the story of his death. But if you look again, and try to decide (for instance) what Jesus’ last words were, you won’t find that they agree. As for his birth, the Gospels differ wildly from each other in their way of thinking about it and recounting it. And so it becomes clear that their intention is *not* to give us a biography, full of unadorned facts, at all. Read Luke’s statement of purpose, in today’s Gospel, and you will see that he is writing “an ordered account *for you, Theophilus*”, based on the *different* accounts drawn up by various predecessors; and his aim is *to show how reliable the teaching is* that the reader called Theophilus has received. *Theophilus* means “lover of God”, so perhaps the real addressees of the Gospel are not some Roman grandee, as the writing seems to suggest, but all of us who love God and long for the coming of Jesus, who need our faith to be *firmly founded*.

### A Book Of Teaching

What the Gospel aims to do, therefore, is to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that the *teaching* about him comes out clearly. Any story that is included is to act as an example to support the faith of the readers. So the needs of Theophilus, and his fellow-believers - that is, our needs - are all-important: Luke will write down what will most support and guide us towards a deeper faith in Christ. His first question will not be the biographer’s (*What happened?*) but the theologian’s (*How can I best tell this?*). So we read the Gospel to find out what we should believe, not to find out a piece of history. This, and not the bald facts of Jesus’ life, is what makes up the good news. We can take immense joy in the fact that Jesus became flesh for us; but we still don’t know the exact history of his early life.

### Fulfilling The Promises Of God

What happens in the first incident of the ministry of Jesus is that he makes a single, heart-stopping claim about himself: having read out one of the most lyrical prophecies of Isaiah, about the bringing of good news to the poor, the preacher gathers the attention of all those present, and says quite simply: *this text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen to me*. That is the whole of his message. *What you have read in the Scriptures, that I am fulfilling. All the promises of God, I am making good today*. It is simple, stunningly bold, and demanding of total obedience. It shares the audacity of John’s great Christmas message, *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*. It shares in the quality of all the great moments in the Gospel: suddenly the details of time and place recede: the little synagogue of Jesus’ home village no longer holds the enormity of what is happening: it is as if the walls dissolve, and the Son of God stands knocking at the door of the whole of humankind, calling for our complete trust, for the trust we had reserved for the Almighty, to be lodged in him.

### Nothing Less Will Do!

Times may have changed, and the human race that answers the door today may be older by “two thousand years of wrong” since Jesus of Nazareth first demanded such commitment from his home town. “Most of these have been emptiness and pain,” says the Psalmist. But the simplicity of his demand has not changed. In him we have to hope, to him we must look for fulfilment of all the promises that have ever held us. I think that our weary search in waterless ground may be teaching us to return to the one who has always told us the truth: the true Evangelist of all the ages, the bearer of good news to the world. His message is not welcome, as his reception in Nazara tells us. But our rivets are tested by listening to him; we shall be judged by the way we accept or reject the Gospel he proclaims. *Fr Philip*