

## **Overview of the Bible 7 – ‘That believing you may have life in his name’: The ministry of Jesus Christ**

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 / Psalm 2 / Hebrews 10:11-25 / Mark 8:31-38

**Biblical books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John**

Sunday Night in the City, Bethlehem, 7 August 2022

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*Tonight we continue our teaching sermon series providing an overview of the whole Bible, and I will be preaching on the ministry of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels, as well as proclaiming the four readings we’ve already heard. Let’s pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth.*

### **Exhortation**

In John 8, Jesus speaks to those who had believed in him. “If you abide in my Word,” he says, “you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-2). The goal of this sermon series is indeed to abide in this Word of God, this Word of Jesus – to spend time in it, to make our home in it, to remain in it. By tracing the narrative of the whole of Scriptures and so providing an overview of the whole Bible, it is like looking over a whole house, entering every room and opening every cupboard, before then making our home in it. And by abiding in this Word, Jesus says, we will know the truth. Without the Word of God we do not know the truth and so we are not free, we are bound in sin, in confusion, in despair. But God has given us his Word so that we may know the truth and so that then the truth can set us free. For it is by the Spirit-filled Word of God that you are not just convicted of your sin, but that you are forgiven on account of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus for you. Freed from sin, and so now free to live with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Christ reigns over all of heaven and earth.

This Good News of Jesus Christ, the Gospel, is precisely where we are up to in this sermon series, and which we will be looking at tonight.

### **Summary of last month**

Last month, we began looking at the New Testament, those books of the Bible written in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ. We looked at how Jesus did not enter the world out of nowhere, but that he came to a particular place and a particular people, to a family in the Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph, who themselves had a genealogy and a history. And so we looked at how Jesus uniquely fulfilled Israel’s longing for a Messiah, being a descendent of King David, being anointed not by holy oil but by the Holy Spirit in baptism, being crowned with thorns, and then being lifted up, on the cross, and at the ascension, to reign for all time. In other words, Christ Jesus came not to destroy the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. As he himself said in Matthew 5:17-8 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” Last month’s sermon was thus entitled ‘A People Prepared’. The history of the people of Israel, that we have followed in this series, was a preparation for Jesus Christ, who is promised throughout the Old Testament, and who can only be understood in the context of the Old Testament.

We also looked last month at some of the characteristics of the four different Gospels, the four different accounts of Jesus' life on earth. This month, we're going to look further at these four Gospels. Rather than go through each of the four in turn, tonight I'll be looking at them all together, proclaiming them as witnesses to the ministry of Jesus Christ in healing and teaching, in dying and in rising for the sins of the world. The Gospels relate all of this not for historical information, but rather to address you personally, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

### **Jesus' Temptation**

After Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, which we looked at last month, Jesus is straight away thrust into temptation. For forty days he is led by the Holy Spirit in the wilderness, where the devil tempts him. The Gospels tell us that he fasted the whole time, and that the devil then tempted him especially with reference to Jesus' power: make this stone turn into bread; throw yourself down from the temple to make God help you and so use God for your own ends; worship me and I'll give you all authority and glory. Jesus' rejection of the devil shows at the outset that the power of Christ is not the kind of power the world and the devil seeks to wield – that of conquest and domination.

But this key episode at the beginning of Jesus' ministry also shows other things – that with baptism, with God's approval and with the possession of the Holy Spirit, will come trials, will come testing. Don't we all know it, too. That as soon as we are called to be in Christ, renewed in our faith, we are tested, just as Jesus was, although unlike us he was without sin. And that is the key significance of Jesus' temptation. Ever since our first parents, Adam and Eve, humanity has succumbed to the temptation of the devil. But Christ begins his ministry as a new Adam. God breathed his Spirit into Adam, just as the Father anointed Jesus with his Holy Spirit. But where Adam gave into the devil's temptations, Christ, the new Adam, succeeds, fulfilling the law that no human could.

### **The Calling of the Apostles**

And so after this victory in temptation, Jesus launches into what is sometimes called his public ministry – his service in the world among Jews mainly but also Gentiles. One of his first actions is to call his apostles. Jesus had many followers, and yet he appointed 12 men to be his apostles, to be unique witnesses to him. As we're going to look at the apostolic church next month, we won't go into it now, but it's worth noting that Jesus' first action of his public ministry is to call the twelve apostles.

In Matthew's Gospel, there is a short summary of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew says: "And [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people" (4:23). While Jesus' teaching and healing go together, we going to look at them in turn now, starting with Jesus' healing ministry.

### **Jesus' Ministry of Healing**

For you can't read far in the Gospels to see that Jesus thrusts himself into healing people, both with physical and spiritual ailments, although the two are never separated in a great

way. As Mark puts it at one point “that evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons... And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons” (1:32,34). Physical and spiritual infirmities alike are in Jesus’ sights, just as they are in Jesus’ ministry to you. Do you remember how the pastor blesses us at the end of Holy Communion, after Jesus has served us with his body and blood? ‘May the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen and preserve you, in body and in soul, to life everlasting’. Body and soul. Not only does he fill our souls, but he is also at work in our bodies, making our bodies holy. That can mean physical healing, but also the granting of God’s holiness and approval that involves physical as well as spiritual transformation. That’s the way Jesus ministers now, and it was the way he ministered then.

One thing interesting about the physical healing is that, like with Holy Communion, Jesus often uses physical means. He takes people by the hand, he lifts people up, he puts his fingers in ears, he spits and touches tongues, he spits on eyes, he touches eyes, he touches dead bodies, he takes bread and fish and multiplies them for hungry crowds. Then there are other times that he just speaks, commanding unclean spirits to leave people, or telling a paralytic: “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home” (Mark 2:11), emphasizing his verbal power by speaking the words “I say to you”. Christ’s Word is powerful, but he is God, and God’s Word is powerful. The Word that spoke the world into being, can speak people into healing, and can speak us into forgiveness, healing, holiness, and communion with Christ and all the kingdom of heaven.

And this indeed is part of the thrust of Jesus’ ministry of healing – it shows that Jesus has power, power which is ultimately much greater than simply healing a sick person who will go on to get sick again and die in a few years’ time. In one episode, a paralytic is let down through a roof on a stretcher by his friends, into the room in which Jesus was healing many people. Jesus says: “Son, your sins are forgiven”. It’s a provocative word, because the man is still before him as a paralytic. And so Jesus asks: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’” The answer, of course, is that forgiveness of sins is harder, or is evidence of a greater power at work. And so, Jesus says: “That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the paralytic – I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” (Mark 2:1-12) We sometimes may wish that Jesus could cure us of a physical ailment, and it can be good to pray for these things. But the forgiveness of sins, and the granting of a good conscience before God and humankind is the greater gift, the greater miraculous healing, according to Jesus’ ministry, and it is the way in which Jesus unfailing serves us, in confession and absolution with your pastor, and in Sunday’s divine service.

Often when Jesus performed miracles of healing, he would tell those who witnessed it to be quiet about it – to not share news of the miracle. So in Luke’s Gospel, for instance, Jesus does not just heal a sick person, but even a dead person, the 12 year old daughter of Jairus who was a ruler of the synagogue. Jesus also healed the dead Lazarus, but it’s worth noting that Jesus’ own resurrection was unlike these healings of the dead. For Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus were brought back to life only to die again a few years’ later. Jesus’ resurrection was the defeat of death, so that Christ is the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18), never to die again, and so bring life through death to all who believe in his name. But back to Jairus’ daughter. After this astonishing healing, Luke tells us: “Her parents were amazed, but [Jesus] charged them to tell no one what had happened” (Luke 8:56). Could you keep that a secret? Why does Jesus say this, here and in many other places? Well, as we saw with the

paralytic man, Jesus sees his healing as subordinate to his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. It's as if he does not want to be known fundamentally as a miracle-working Messiah, but as a dying and rising Messiah. Just like us, the people wanted a miracle worker, but as Jesus' temptation in the wilderness showed, with Christ comes the cross, and Christ's power is made perfect in weakness, not simply in worldly displays of power. And so we even hear that the Pharisees come to Jesus demanding a sign, a miracle, and he won't give it to them (Mark 8:11-13). So too at the cross when the people and soldiers demand Jesus save himself miraculously (Luke 23:35-7). That's the kind of thing that the devil had tempted Jesus with. But Jesus came to die for the world, and so he gives no miracle to the glory-seekers.

There is one other dimension of Jesus' healing ministry that I want to draw out from the Gospels. And that is that Jesus' healings show a kind of cosmic context. Who are the ones who recognise who Jesus is first? The demons and unclean spirits. In the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel, as soon as Jesus begins his ministry and teaches in the synagogue, we hear this: "And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" (Mark 1:23-4). It is the first, and perhaps the greatest, confession of who Jesus is in Mark's Gospel, and it comes from an unclean spirit. Remember Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit, and so his Holiness confronts the uncleanness of the unclean spirits. Like fire and petrol, the two cannot exist together, and the petrol has the most to fear, as the unclean spirits do here. But that analogy can only be pressed so far, for in some ways, what Jesus' ministry of healing does is soak up the uncleanness around him. Even though he is the Holy One of God, as the unclean spirit knew, Jesus in a very real way takes on the uncleanness of the world. One of the reasons why the Jews found it hard to believe Jesus was the Messiah, was because he kept touching unclean people, putting himself in a state of ritual uncleanness, reaching the absolute high point on the cross. "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" says the law of the Old Testament (Galatians 3:13; see Deuteronomy 21:22-3). In what Martin Luther called the Great Exchange, Jesus' ministry of healing is one of both granting healing and forgiveness, while taking upon himself our sin, our uncleanness, our impurity, even unto death on a cross, and yet albeit remaining without sin.

In this way, Jesus' miraculous healings are intimately connected with his death and resurrection, and also connected with you. In dealing with the unclean spirits then, he dealt with our unclean spirits too, and showed how he serves us, revealing his full power. The world today has many pretenders to a kind of supernatural power, and we are tempted to be taken up by them. But Christ alone is the Holy One. And, as John's Gospel puts it, the miraculous signs are "written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

### **Jesus' Ministry of Teaching**

The other key dimension of Jesus' ministry aside from healing is his teaching, although as we've seen, Jesus' healing is also a teaching and proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, so the two are connected. But Jesus does engage in sometimes quite long speeches, or discourses, teaching and proclaiming the kingdom of God in various ways. He teaches on a mount, sitting to show his authority, he teaches on a plain, he teaches while walking, and he especially teaches in synagogues, showing his intimate connection with the Word of the Old

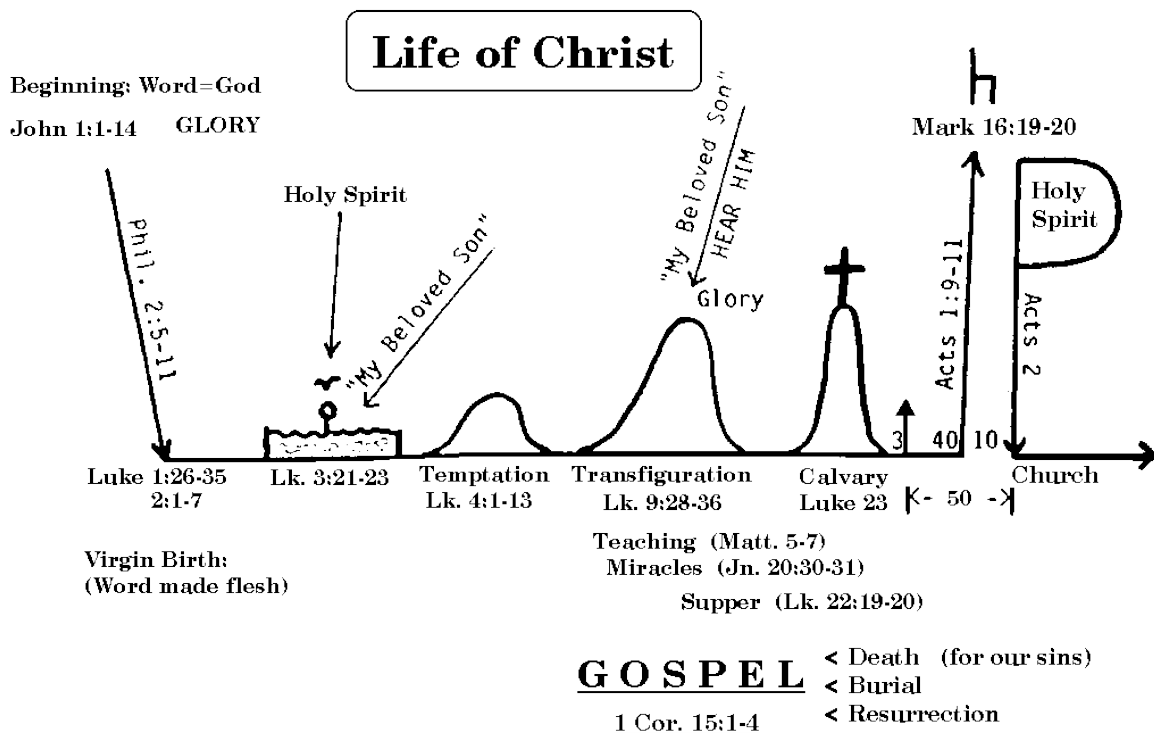
Testament, which was read out aloud in the synagogue, and also his intimate connection with the location of Jesus' teaching today – the Word of God read and proclaimed in the divine service on Sunday.

In all of these different places the audience to whom Jesus teaches is relevant in understanding his teaching, and this is never more so than in understanding why Jesus uses parables: stories or sayings which bear witness to the kingdom of God. Our Sunday sermons are often good opportunities for us to explore a parable, teasing out some of the dimensions of its meaning. At one point, after Jesus had told the parable of the sower to the unbelieving crowds around him, the disciples come to him in private and ask: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Jesus told them: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given... This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:10-13). So while Jesus uses these parables to reveal truth to the believers like us, he also uses them to hide the truth from unbelievers. For Jesus teaches in parables because they have to do with what is hidden, with mystery. And so it's only those with faith and the Spirit who have access to the mystery of Christ – that's why they're so rich for meditation in church, when we are gathered by the Holy Spirit in the presence of Christ. Of course unbelievers can understand parables logically, but they can't experience what it says, it doesn't bring them into the mystery of Christ and his kingdom, and so they miss the point.

To his disciples, Jesus sometimes explains the parables, but he also teaches in a more direct fashion. It's impossible to survey the content of Jesus' teaching, but we can focus on a few things. There is a strong focus to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. What does it mean to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus? It is to be forgiven and to forgive. Martin Luther called the church a hospital, because the essence of Christian identity is not first to serve Jesus in our perfection, but to be served by Jesus in his perfection, and in our need for mercy, love, and holiness. In one parable, Jesus imagines a Pharisee in the Temple thanking God for the spiritual growth in his life so that he is not like others around him. Nearby in the Temple, however, is a tax collector who simply prays for mercy on a sinner like him. And it's the tax collector who goes away justified. In another parable, Jesus likens you and me to a servant forgiven billions of dollars by the king, only to go and prosecute someone who owes a small amount. We have been forgiven, and so we are to forgive, just as Jesus prays in the Lord's prayer. In this vain also, Jesus commands us not to judge others, not to look down on any fellow sinner as if you were not a lawbreaker yourself, not to think others are worse than you because of something they did or said. So the grumbling older brother in the parable of the prodigal son is challenged in this way. The generous mercy of his father is all his, just as it was for his prodigal brother. It's his own looking sideways in judgment that is blocking his own reception of grace.

## **The Transfiguration**

There are many other dimensions to Jesus' teaching that we can't go into. One important dimension is the way in which Jesus' teaching looks to his future return and the end of the world, something that we'll look at in the final sermon in this series. But there is one thing unites all of his teaching: that it is given by the One who came to die for the sins of the world. Jesus' teaching is not like teaching from Buddha, or King Solomon, or Jordan Peterson. It comes from the lips of the Saviour Himself, God in the flesh.



This is revealed dramatically at one of the most prominent markers in the three synoptic Gospels, the moment of Jesus' transfiguration on a mountain midway through his ministry. There Jesus' divinity is revealed to three of the disciples, and Jesus is acknowledged by his Father, just as he was at his baptism, and as tonight's Psalm prophesied "You are my Son, today I have become your Father" – although this adoption language does not mean that the Father was not always the Father of the Son. But it is also at the time of the Transfiguration that Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, and also extends the suffering to us, saying: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34), as we heard in tonight's Gospel.

### Who is Jesus?

At the heart of Jesus' teaching, and at the heart of his whole ministry, then, is the identity of Jesus – as both the divine Son of God, and as the suffering servant we heard Isaiah prophecy in tonight's reading. Jesus' teaching only makes sense in light of this, and the question of his identity permeates the Gospels. It's at the very point of the transfiguration that Jesus asks his disciples the crucial question for them, for us, and for the whole world: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter gets the part right about Jesus being the Son of God, but quickly rebukes Jesus for saying he must die and rise again. The reverse is true for many in Jerusalem on Good Friday – they could see that Jesus was to die, but not that he was the Son of God. As the chief priest Caiaphas said, it would be expedient that one man should die for the people (John 18:14).

While Jesus is often a bit coy about openly declaring who he is, it is during his trial that he openly states who he is. The same Caiaphas, before the Jewish Council, asked Jesus outright: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And for once Jesus is clear in his answer: "I am" he declares, and it is an "I am" that echoes all the way back to the burning bush and

Moses, with God identifying himself as “I am” (Mark 14:61-62). By being open about his identity only now, it’s as if Jesus wanted to be crucified for the right reason, he wanted to be clear that it was as God in the flesh that he was also dying for the sins of the world.

### **Exhortation**

And so finally it is not so much Jesus’ healing and teaching that take centre stage, but rather his life, death and resurrection which becomes the drama. It is only in this cosmic event that Jesus’ healing and teaching make sense, also for us today. The four Gospels are inordinately taken up with the last few days of Jesus’ life. For Christ crucified is the truth that the Word proclaims, and the truth that sets us free.

It is in Christ alone that you are healed, in body and soul. It is in Christ alone that you are granted a place in the kingdom of God, and led into the way of life in God’s kingdom. It is in Christ alone that you live. And, God willing, it will be in Christ alone that we all shall die, and so pass through death into eternal life, where the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, already is reigning now, and for all eternity.

*And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

### ***Next Month...***

#### **4 September: 'We must obey God rather than men': The Apostolic Church**

Biblical books: Acts, Galatians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Texts for the Divine Service:

Isaiah 56:6-8 / Psalm 86:1-13 / Acts 1:1-5 / Mark 3:13-19

Recommended Pre-Reading:

- Acts 1-2 – Ascension and Pentecost
- Acts 6-7 – The martyrdom of Stephen the deacon
- Acts 9 – Conversion of Saul
- Acts 10 – Peter and Cornelius
- Acts 15 – The Council of Jerusalem
- Galatians 2 – Paul and the Apostles
- 1 Timothy 3 – Qualifications for Overseers and Deacons
- 2 Timothy 1 – Guard the Deposit Entrusted to You
- Titus 2 – Teach Sound Doctrine
- Philemon – Short book on love and slavery

Recommended on YouTube:

- “Acts of the Apostles (1994)” is a movie version of Acts. In the corner of the movie they show the chapter and verse of Acts they are portraying, and the verse number ticks along as the story does. So you can follow along with your Bible.
- Search for ‘The Bible Project Acts’, and likewise for the other books.