

# THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: DISCOVERING ITS RICHES

A Parish Introduction to Study of the Bible  
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## I INTRODUCTION

So much information comes to us these days: communication is constant in most of our lives. It comes so quickly, and often goes just as quickly. Do we stop and realize that God has spoken to us: through God's Word, Jesus, the Son of God. In the early years of the Church, God's Spirit was at work making available divine communication in written form. During this initial stage of its life, the Church began to identify, and over time, designate certain writings among many that were circulating as equivalent to the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. And thus the New Testament was formed. For Christians, our Bible has this significant history as its origin. This was a decades-long process, empowered by the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost.

Of special importance in the Christian Scriptures were the Gospels, extensive accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus, and four of these were recognized and accepted as having the qualities of the authentic apostolic faith, already being preached and taught since the time of Jesus, and now being spread in written form.

The four gospel accounts were associated with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, named as evangelists. Luke in particular gives us an indication of how these accounts were composed: in his prologue he points to the sources of his materials: eye witnesses to the original events, the teachings that were given by ministers of the Word, and by accounts of the life and sayings of Jesus already written down by others. Among the four gospels we can readily see repeated words and phrases equally shared, with each evangelist now recognizing a need to retell the same story in a particular way, with a new emphasis needed for a particular group of people

The very fact of having been given the four accounts of who this Jesus of Nazareth was, leads us to reflect that one account of this narrative was not enough. In God's providence, there is a need to tell the story from multiple points of view. And so just as the Christian is meant to live out what Christ modeled and who he is, so it is that when we are true to his light

and grace, we ourselves are another version of the gospel—hopefully true to the Lord’s own example—another expression of the limitless greatness of our leader and shepherd.

This Lent we will focus on two of the evangelists featured in the current liturgical cycle: Mark and John. These men were chosen as instruments of the Holy Spirit: moved to put in written form, with a truthfulness that has its source in the grace of God, designated as “inspiration”. The word “revelation” is another form of God’s grace. In our Catholic teaching, we understand this to mean a more directive movement of God to write what was literally coming down from a heavenly source. John’s work in the Book of Revelation has this special quality, in recording messages to be sent and visions to recount.

## II GOSPELS FOR THIS LITURGICAL YEAR: MARK AND JOHN

Very important in seeing the differences between the written accounts of these evangelists is in the heavy emphasis given to the humanity or the divinity in the person of Jesus. Mark has an immediacy in his telling of the story. At work is a journalist graphically describing the dynamism of a very real person: the gestures of Jesus, his immediate reactions to people and circumstances around him, his anger, frustration and loving kindness all very real. In this telling, He physically embraces the children, touches the diseased, as the time of his passion drew near, his heart is “filled with sorrow to the point of death.” The excitement of the crowds reacting to Jesus is notable as they see before their eyes heavenly power revealed in the miracles of Jesus and a new divine authority resonating in his teachings. The joy of the crowds at seeing Jesus outwit the Scribes and Pharisees made for great entertainment among them. The singular figure of Jesus is strongly contrasted to everyone else in his company: the consternation of his relatives over this new mission he has taken on and the failures and obstinacy of the chosen Twelve are repeated over and over—right to the end.

These two evangelists we are dealing with are different in many aspects. Mark’s gospel, as generally considered by the scholars, was the earliest written among the four: John’s was the latest. The precise dates are difficult to determine: Mark’s around the year 70 AD; John’s in the 90’s. Mark is considered to have written for the Christian community of Rome. He has a sense of ordinary people in his language: Mark is clear in bringing to the believers’ attention the gestures and the ready communication of Jesus of his emotions: compassion on those who sought his help; strength in his challenge to those who needed to listen more carefully to his words; frustration at the slowness of his closest companions to believe and understand his words. Living in Rome would make one aware of the vitality of large crowds of people with all their bustle and noise. And so we often hear this evangelist comment on the excited reaction

to Jesus by the people: their amazement at his miracles, their great joy at seeing him reduce his opponents in public arguments. The vitality of peoples' reactions on seeing the "power" and "authority" manifested in the words and deeds of Jesus would be easily understood by people living at the center of the Roman Empire's administration, these two great strengths of Roman domination very visible in the daily life of a Roman. The grand spectacle of victorious generals parading into the city of Rome with their armies along with numbers of prisoners were seen by large crowds; these displays were sometimes called the "glory" of these heroic figures. Jesus speaks of that day when he himself, the Son of Man "will come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels". (Mk 8,38) That coming was prophesied in the great prophetic vision found in the Book of Daniel, where the "Son of Man" with the company of God's people to receive power and dominion over all nations. (Dan 7,14) The gospels bring alive sights and sounds they are familiar with.

The Roman centurion proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God at the scene of the crucifixion would be especially significant to Roman Christians, as they hear of this figure, the Roman Empire's official witness to the death of an executed criminal, make this profound act of faith. (Mk 15,39)

As mentioned above, the gospel according to Mark is considered to be the first of the four written gospels. St. John's was the last, written in the 90's. This gospel has a special quality about it, and gives the strong impression of being the result of deep prayer and meditation on the words and actions of Jesus over a long period of time. The evangelist identifies himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jn 13,23). This deep personal love and closeness to the Lord makes John a great witness of the divine love and light of Christ.

The evangelist is often called "St. John the Divine" because of the spiritual quality of his account, with the divinity of Jesus shining through at all times.. St. Mark begins the gospel story of Jesus with the appearance of Jesus at the Jordan River, when the voice of the heavenly Father declares Jesus as his beloved Son. St. John points to the eternal origin of Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1,1) He speaks further of those who saw this heavenly presence: "We have seen his glory: the glory of an only Son coming from the Father". (Jn 1,14) Jesus carries out his mission, and reveals divine light. The miracle at Cana, the first of his signs, caused awe in his disciples: "Thus did he reveal his glory, and his disciples believed in him." (Jn 2,11)

In his discourses Jesus frequently refers to his union with the heavenly Father. He uses the phrase "I Am", bringing great uneasiness to his opponents. That phrase brought implications of God's revelation to Moses: "I Am Who Am" (Exod 3,14)

As we review John's account of the passion of Christ in subsequent reflections, we can learn more about what God reveals to all of us in the great sacrifice that restored a new and lasting bond between heaven and earth.

### III HOLY THURSDAY: THE LORD'S SUPPER

The reading from the gospel according to John, designated for the liturgy of Holy Thursday, brings us into the circle of the Lord's closest followers at the Last Supper, as we hear of words and actions that express his deep ties to them. Beginning with the washing of their feet, the entire evening is deep in poignant meaning and emotion: "He had loved his own in this world, and he would show his love for them in the end" (Jn 13,1).

Once Judas had departed, Jesus shares his heart with them. This evangelist calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jn 13,21), never giving his own name. We can be much in tune with the reason for this, if we reflect that our own name can readily be inserted in that passage, since we can with good reason be assured of the Lord's personal love for us: "I call you friends...(Jn 15,14-15)

The effects of this closeness to the Lord are revealed to us in his revelation of the divine quality of this love: "As the Father has loved me, so I love you." (Jn 15,9) "Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him: we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him." (Jn 14,23) The Spirit, the Paraclete, will be sent to seal this unity that has been given them. (Jn 14,16)

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed to us in this very meaningful setting. It is not a teaching meant to be comprehended simply by the mind, as a mystery to be puzzled over, never to be unraveled. Neither is it meant to be restricted to being printed on the page of a catechism or in a learned theological treatise, or to be repeated as we join in professing our faith. Rather, as with the other teachings given by the Lord, it is an invitation to be enter into the personal realm of the divine reality itself. It is, like any meaningful human relationship, a privileged place where hearts and minds are bound together-- a bond, forming a unity that is experienced and lived out. Without this, our faith is deficient.

More than with the other gospel accounts, John's testimony requires time, and serious, prayerful reflection to do justice to this great gift which through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God has given to the Church.