

Lesson 16

- The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke
- Jesus starts his work
- The church service

Lesson 16a

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke

The first four books of New Testament are called the gospels. These books bring the good news that the Saviour of the world has been born. They give an account of his life and teaching and tell of how his suffering, death and resurrection free people from sin and death.

Jesus' command

When Jesus starts his work, he chooses twelve men to join Him. The bible calls these men his disciples, his pupils, and they become witnesses of everything that Jesus does. After Jesus has returned to heaven they are to pass on everything they have seen and heard. The disciples do what Jesus commanded and bring his message to Jews and other people alike.

Many people come to faith and become Christians. Very soon there is a demand amongst the Christians for a written account of the life and work of Jesus. This is how the gospels come about.

Because the first three gospels, those of Matthew, Mark and Luke, are so similar, we discuss them all together in one lesson. In the next lesson we will discuss the fourth gospel, that of John.

Parallels and differences

The first thing that is remarkable about the gospels is that none of them gives an account of the entire life of Jesus. None of them says very much about his youth. The main part of the gospels discusses the three years of his public ministry, the final years of his life. From this we know that the gospels are not meant to be biographies.

None of the first three gospels explicitly states why it has been written. To find out we need to study its contents.

When we read these three gospels we can conclude that they have been written to tell the history of Jesus according to his

words and deeds. His suffering and death are central. The writers want their readers to understand that that was the reason for the Son of God to come to earth. He came to earth to suffer and die so that He could save people.

The gospels have an open ending. They relate the beginning of the history of Jesus. After his life on earth He continues his work from heaven. He sends the Holy Spirit and gives numerous people faith in Him. For people who want to get to know Jesus the gospels are still the way to get to know him.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the facts of Jesus' life. How do we know we can trust these facts to be true? When it comes to the accounts of the teaching of Jesus, there are a lot of parallels in all the gospels. The same is not always true for the events that are described around the teaching. Sometimes there is an event that we find in one gospel and not in another. And sometimes two writers describe one and the same event very differently.

These differences do not necessarily make the gospels unreliable. In the three years that Jesus travelled across Israel, He was working constantly. He gave the same teaching in different places and did many miracles along the way. He healed countless people. The writers of the gospels have had to make choices as to what they would include and what not. When two gospels tell us about the healing of a blind man that does not necessarily have to be the same miracle. It might have been two different occasions in different places and in different moments of time.

What we can conclude from the gospels is that every writer tends to portray Jesus differently. We will therefore look at who the writers of the gospels were, who they wrote their gospels for and what characterises their writing.

The gospel according to Matthew

- *The author Matthew*

Matthew, also called Levi, was a tax collector. In his time tax collectors were not very popular at all. They would be

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employed by the Romans and they were known to demand too much tax from people so that they could keep part of it for themselves. The Israelites generally regard them as despicable. Nevertheless, Jesus chooses Matthew to become his disciple.

- *Matthew's first readers*

Matthew originally wrote his gospel for the Jewish Christians.

- *Characteristics of Matthew's gospel*

The Christian Jews who read Matthew's gospel live amongst fellow Jews who do not believe that Jesus is the promised Saviour. That is probably why Matthew constantly proves that Jesus' coming and everything He did was already foretold in the Old Testament.

At the beginning of his book Matthew starts off showing that Jesus is a descendant of Abraham. He is the promised descendant of Abraham in whom all people on the earth would be blessed. Matthew also shows how the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament have become reality with the coming of Jesus. Again and again Matthew uses Old Testament passages to show that Jesus fulfils them with his words and deeds. Over and over he says: *'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet...'*

Matthew's gospel is full of Old Testament references. It is not his idea. Jesus did the same as we can tell from many of the conversations that Matthew relates between Jesus and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These people do not want to believe that Jesus is the promised Saviour and constantly try to catch Him lying or otherwise confuse Him. Jesus does not defend Himself when they do so He simply directs them to the Old Testament. Over and over Jesus shows that everything He does was foretold in the Old Testament:

'Haven't you read what David did...' (Matthew 12:3)

'Or haven't you read in the law...' (Matthew 12:5)

'If you had known what these words mean...' (Matthew 12:7)

Matthew clearly explains in his gospel that Jesus is the promised one that the Jews have awaited for centuries. At the same time, he points out that if the Jews refuse to believe that Jesus is the promised Saviour, people of other nations will take their place in the Kingdom of God. The story of the foreign astrologers who come to pay their respects to the baby Jesus, is an example of that. Jesus Himself also points it out repeatedly.

The gospel according to Mark

- *The author Mark*

Mark did not belong to the twelve disciples of Jesus. Neither do we explicitly come across him in the gospels. The first time we read about him is in the book of Acts. Mark must have been in touch with the disciples from an early stage because he joins them on one of their first mission journeys.

- *Mark's first readers*

Mark most probably wrote for the early Christian churches.

- *Characteristics of Mark's gospel*

Mark's gospel is the shortest. He does not give an account of the birth of Jesus but starts his gospel with the work of John the Baptist. He tells how Jesus is baptised by John and then starts his work.

Mark's gospel has a great sense of speed to it. He constantly uses the word *immediately*, which seems to hurry the work Jesus is doing.

In his gospel Mark writes down what Peter remembers of his time with Jesus. He emphasises the miracles that Jesus does. He heals the ill, exorcises demons and even brings dead people back to life. Mark describes the reactions of people who see Jesus do his miracles. They say: *'We have never*

seen anything like this! and Mark says: *'People were overwhelmed with amazement'*.

These reactions are very understandable and Mark does not judge the people for it. He does try to tell his readers that their response should be more than amazement. They should try to see beyond Jesus' miracles. Jesus did not do miracles just for the sake of them. He even told people who were healed to keep quiet about it:

'Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone' (Mark 7:36)

'Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him' (Mark 8:30)

Jesus is not like other people who want to be praised for the things they do. He is the Son of God who came to earth to save man. He wants people to believe in Him.

The gospel according to Luke

- *The author Luke*

Luke was a doctor and not from Jewish descent. After he became a Christian he helped to spread the gospel.

- *Luke's first readers*

Luke wrote his gospel for Roman Christians who spoke Greek. He dedicated it to a man named Theophilus, who held a high position in the Roman government. Luke made his study of everything Jesus had said and done, especially for him.

- *Characteristics of Luke's gospel*

A large part of Luke's gospel describes the last journey that Jesus and his twelve disciples made on foot from Galilee to Jerusalem where Jesus was to be crucified. The other authors have not paid so much attention to this journey. That is why we find details in Luke's gospel that we do not find in the other gospels. In his account Luke clearly shows that Jesus does not only have power over illnesses and death but that moreover He has the power to save the lives of people who are lost in

their sin. It is the salvation that Jesus wants to bring to everyone even to people who are rejected by society.

Luke 15:1-2

'Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Luke describes how Jesus meets Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is the head of tax collectors and has become wealthy at the expense of his fellow Jews. He is obviously not popular but Jesus visits him and Zacchaeus comes to faith. He repents and he shows it. He promises Jesus immediately to give away half his money to the poor and to pay back four times what he has taken unjustly from the people.

To the grumbling people Jesus explains why He went to visit Zacchaeus: *'The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost'* (Luke 19:10).

Another story that underlines the purpose of Jesus' coming to earth is the parable of the prodigal son in chapter 15. Every man, whatever he has done, can return to God and God will receive him with open arms.

Luke has written a second book in addition to his gospel, the Acts of the Apostles or simply the book of Acts. In this book we read how the history of Jesus did not end with the gospel. Jesus' followers spread the good news even as far as Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of the first three gospels?
2. Briefly explain the emphasis of each of the gospels.
3. Luke starts the genealogy of Jesus with Adam, the father of mankind. Explain why it is Luke who starts with Adam.

Lesson 16b

Jesus starts his work

In the a-series we have discussed what characterises the first three gospels. In this lesson and the following lessons in the b-series we will look at the contents of the gospels. We will start with an event that took place when Jesus was young.

Jesus in the temple

Read: Luke 2:40-52

2:40 *the grace of God was upon him*: he was favoured in the eyes of God

Three times a year the Israelite men had to go to Jerusalem to celebrate and worship God. One of these celebrations was the Passover. Joseph does not go alone; he takes Mary and Jesus.

When the week of celebration has finished the people return in large groups to their different towns. It is not surprising that Joseph and Mary only miss Jesus after a day. They must have assumed that He was with their relatives or friends.

When they find out that Jesus is not with their group they panic. They immediately return to Jerusalem. There they find their son totally engaged in a conversation with a number of teachers of the law. Mary and Joseph cannot believe their eyes when they see Jesus chatting away as if nothing is the matter. Mary tells Him: 'Your dad and I have been worried! We have looked for you everywhere!' Jesus answers her: 'Why did you look for me? Don't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'

It must have been strange to Mary and Joseph to hear Jesus talk about his Father's house. It is obvious that Jesus does not mean Joseph when he speaks of his Father. He means that God, rather than Joseph, is his real Father. Nothing is more natural for Jesus than to be in God's house where can learn more about Him.

Joseph and Mary knew Jesus was not an ordinary child but apparently that knowledge had faded into the background in the course of the years. When this happens they are reminded of Jesus' descent: He is the Son of God.

John the herald

Jesus has thirty years to prepare for the work that awaits Him. In this time He studies the Old Testament and learns what God, his Father, expects from Him. Only then He takes up his task as Saviour. Before He does so, He needs to be baptised.

Read: Matthew 3

3:1 *desert*: not sand plains but rather a wilderness

3:2 *the Kingdom of Heaven*: the kingdom of God that all the Jews are waiting for. See also the list of vocabulary

3:12 *winnowing fork*: a tool used to separate grain from the chaff

In the time before newspapers, radio or television, a herald would often announce the coming of a king. The herald would travel ahead of the king and ensure that the people would be prepared to receive him.

John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is the herald that goes ahead of Jesus. Just like any herald would, John calls on people to prepare themselves for the coming of the king. However, John is not an ordinary herald. You can tell from his clothes: he wears a simple camel hair robe and leather belt. It makes him look like prophet of judgement. His lifestyle is also very simple. Like other people in the desert he lives on locusts and honey.

The way in which John addresses people also shows that he is not an ordinary herald. He does not go out to the places you would expect a herald to go. He does not go to Jerusalem or other cities. He waits for people to come to him. If they want to hear about the king and his kingdom, they will have to come to the wilderness, to the river Jordan.

John's message is extraordinary for a herald. He does not encourage people to decorate their cities and put on their best

clothes. He calls them to repentance. He makes it clear that the people are not ready to receive their king. They will have to change radically.

John the Baptist

Many people come to listen to John. They come from Jerusalem, from Judea and the Jordan region to listen to his message. John does not only speak to the people, he also baptises them. Baptism is not unfamiliar with the Jews. Every gentile* who would convert to Judaism in that time had to be circumcised and baptised. Baptism signifies that a person's old, sinful life is washed away like dirt in the water. To the Jews baptism is meant for people who do not belong to God. However, John calls Jews to be baptised. They have to admit that they cannot belong to God as they are. They need to start a new life. It is remarkable how many Jews want to undergo this humbling experience. Many of the people who come to listen to John repent of their sins and are baptised. Not only ordinary people come to John. Many Pharisees and Sadducees also come to the place where John baptises. They are people who strictly keep the commandments and perhaps they expect John's praise and his assurance that they do not need to be baptised. However, John announces God's punishment over them. He can tell that they do not want to repent. Behind their piety they have a wrong attitude. They think they are safe because they are Abraham's descendants with whom God made a covenant. John warns them not to rely on their descent. Just as you can expect a good tree to bear good fruit, so God expects Abraham's children to turn to Him. If they do not do so, God will have to punish them.

John explains to his listeners that he is not important. He is only a herald. The person that comes after him is so important that John is not even good enough to do the most humiliating work for Him. The people might be impressed with John but the person that is really important is much more powerful than John. John baptises people in water but the person who will come after him will baptise people with the Holy Spirit.

Through the Holy Spirit He will change people from the inside. People who do not want to accept Him will be punished, they will be baptised with fire. John uses the imagery of the harvest. The people who will worship the king will be like grain that will be stored away safely in a barn. The others are like useless chaff that will be burned.

The king arrives

The king that John announced does not enter Jerusalem in a grand parade. There is no coronation ceremony. One day He just appears amongst the people who listen to John. No one in the crowd knows who He is.

Jesus is no ordinary king. During his life on earth it will mostly be invisible that He is king and that He is the Son of God. He once said that He did not come to earth to be served but to serve and to give his life to save the lives of many people.

Just like the other people Jesus wants to be baptised. John protests when he hears this. How can he baptise Jesus? Jesus, the king that he has been announcing certainly does not need to be cleansed of his old life to start a new life! Nevertheless, Jesus asks John to baptise Him. He shows that He wants to be united with sinful people. He even wants to take their sins on themselves. You could say that the dirt that has been washed off all these other people now clings to Him. God shows that it is his will that Jesus is baptised. When Jesus rises from the water, the heavens open above Him and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove*, comes down on Him. God Himself announces that Jesus is his Son and that He loves Him.

This incident was God's anointing of Jesus. Normally people with an important task would be anointed with oil. The oil was a sign of the Holy Spirit but Jesus is directly anointed with the Holy Spirit. From now on He is appointed to do the task God has given Him and He is ready for it.

Jesus starts his work

The work begins

Read: Matthew 4:1-11

4:2 *fasting**: in this case a way to focus on spiritual matters

4:3 *the tempter*: Satan or the devil

4:5 *the holy city*: Jerusalem

Immediately after Jesus has been baptised, the Holy Spirit sends Him to the desert. During forty days He prays and fasts in complete solitude.

From the books of Mark and Luke we know that during those forty days He was tested by Satan. Satan continually tempts Jesus to turn his back on God.

After forty days Jesus is hungry. Exactly then Satan lounges his final and most fierce attack. In three different ways he tries to convince Jesus to renounce God.

1. Satan uses the fact that Jesus is hungry. Before Jesus went into the desert God had affirmed that Jesus is his Son. If that is true Jesus can turn the stones that lie around into bread. However, Jesus does not fall for this temptation to show the devil that He really is the Son of God. From the bible He explains that it is not right for Him to use his power in that way. Just as God could give the Israelites bread with one word of his mouth when they were in the desert, so can He feed his Son with a single word. Jesus trusts his Father and waits for Him to feed Him.
2. Satan continues on the theme of relying on God. He takes Jesus to Jerusalem and challenges Him to jump off the temple. He even quotes the bible to show Jesus He does not need to be afraid because the bible promises that angels will protect Him. Jesus refuses to prove his trust in God in this way. From the bible He shows that it is wrong to put God's power to the test.
3. Finally, Satan tries to get Jesus to take a shortcut to receive all the power in the world. Via a long way of

suffering and death God wants to give Jesus all the power and might and now Satan offers an easier way to achieve it. All He needs to do is to kneel once before Satan. Just for one moment He has to consider Satan as God and ruler over everything. Jesus does not fall for this temptation. He orders Satan to leave Him. He will not bow before Him; a man can only bow before God.

Then Satan leaves Jesus alone. He temporarily gives up the battle. God sends angels to serve Jesus and bring Him food. He has rightly trusted God.

What happens here should remind us of what happened in paradise. Then Satan tried to bring Eve to rebel against God and he was successful. Eve believed Satan and was disobedient to God. Satan now tries to do the same with Jesus. This time the salvation of mankind is at stake. Had Jesus given in, everything would have been lost. However, Jesus reacts the way Adam and Eve should have reacted. He remains faithful to God whatever Satan tells Him.

Jesus, the light in the darkness

Read: Matthew 4:12-22

We know from the book of John that Jesus first works in Judea for a while. At that time John the Baptist is also still at work. At one point John is put in prison and Jesus leaves for Galilee, a remote area in the north of Israel. From there He starts a year of great activity.

The prophet Isaiah had already announced this. The north of Israel where the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali lived, had been punished first by God. They had been taken captive first. Now God shows this area his love in a special way. Jesus, the light of the world uses it as his home base to work from.

Jesus does not remain alone. He chooses twelve men to be his disciples. From that moment onward they accompany Him

everywhere. Matthew tells us how Jesus chooses his first four disciples. He simply tells them to follow Him and they leave their jobs and their families and go with Jesus.

Questions

1a. Why does John baptise people? Read Luke 3:3 where Luke describes John's baptism.

1b. Why does John not want to baptise Jesus?

1c. Why does he have to baptise Jesus?

2a. How can we know that the people truly repent? Read Luke 3:10-14. Luke 3 describes the same history as Matthew 3.

2b. How can people show today that they truly want to repent to God?

3a. What are the parallels between what happened in paradise (Genesis 3:1-6, lesson 2b) and what happened in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11)?

3b. What are the differences?

4. Why is Jesus called the Christ? (Lesson 5c)

Lesson 16c
The church service

In the last three lessons we discussed the church. What is the church and how can you know if a church truly is the church of Jesus Christ? In this lesson we will discuss what happens in a church service.

Why do people go to church?

Every Sunday the church of Jesus Christ comes together. The members of the church do not meet twice a Sunday just because they happen to be a bunch of good friends. Neither do they have a shared hobby. The only reason they meet is because Jesus Christ brings them together. You could say that Jesus calls them to the church. People with the most incredible differences in character, age and education who would otherwise never meet, come together in the church because Jesus wants them to.

All those people belong together. They have all been saved by Jesus Christ. All of them take part in God's covenant. They are children of God the Father and therefore they are like brothers and sisters to one another. That is also how the pastor addresses them, as brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ (That is to say, through the work of Jesus Christ). And even though the members of the church might not have chosen one another as friends otherwise, they start to love one another. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ loves them so much that He has given his life for them and that love of Christ causes the believers to love one another.

What happens in church?

The church service is a meeting. At first sight it seems to be only a meeting of church members. However, it is more than that. It is a meeting between God and his church. Through the Holy Spirit God is present in the service. He speaks to his children, for example when they read from the bible. His children respond to Him, through songs and prayers. The

service is like conversation between God the Father and his children.

Not every church service is exactly the same. Nevertheless, there are some elements that can be found in church services all over the world. In this lesson we will discuss these elements one by one.

Acknowledgment of dependency

Most churches in the reformed tradition start of their service with an expression of reliance on God. The pastor will ask the congregation to stand up. He might ask them to lift up their hearts to God or to focus their thoughts and attention on God. In some churches the pastor uses the passage:

Psalm 124:8

*'Our help is in the name of the LORD,
The Maker of heaven and earth'*

With these words from Psalm 124 the members of the church acknowledge that they are completely dependent on God, the Creator of heaven and earth. They expect everything from Him and without Him they would be nowhere.

God's greeting

The pastor of the church speaks in the name of God to the congregation. In some churches he uses a passage to welcome them:

1 Corinthians 1:3

'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'

Just like a person would greet a friend, God greets his church via the pastor. From the beginning of the service God is present. He wants to be in touch with his children and wishes them grace and peace.

In other churches a pastor might use different passages to greet the congregation.

The law

When the people of Israel travelled through the desert God gave them his law. In many reformed churches that law is still read out every Sunday. God speaks to the church through the law.

When the members of the church hear God's commands they realise how much they have fallen short in their service of God. In the past week they have lacked love for God and their neighbour. Every day they have disobeyed God in all sorts of different ways. The law functions as a mirror for the people to realise how sinful they are.

However, the reading of the law does not need to discourage the listeners. They know that God will not only look at their shortcomings. When they ask God for forgiveness for all their wrong doings, He will grant it to them. Jesus Christ has been punished for their sins.

The law is not only a mirror for people's sinfulness; it provides a way for the people to show their gratefulness. The believers know that God has saved them from the power of sin and death. That is something to be grateful for. They can express their gratefulness by doing their utmost to live a life that pleases God, according to the rules of his law.

The creed

Besides the law, the creed has an important place in the church service. For more than two thousand years church members all over the world have accepted the Apostolic Creed as a reliable summary of the bible. Every Sunday they express all together by means of the Creed what they believe, what they stand for. They express that they want to belong to the God of the bible.

The Creed can be read out by the pastor or the congregation can recite or sing it. When the pastor reads out the Creed, the congregation might sing a psalm or a hymn to affirm it.

Prayer

Prayer forms an important part of a church service. It is a way for the whole congregation to directly come before God. The church comes before God's throne to speak with the King of heaven and earth. In their prayer the members of the congregation thank and praise God who made the earth and has saved them from death. They ask God to forgive their sins and to be with them with his Holy Spirit and to make them into different people. The congregation can also pray for people who are ill or going through a difficult time and for people who live in places where there is war or famine. The church asks God to bring people to faith in Him.

The prayer is often finished with the words: '*We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ*'. This is to indicate that the congregation does not deserve God's answer to their prayers. They ask God to listen because of what Jesus has done.

Singing

Throughout the service the congregation does a lot of singing. The 150 Psalms from the Old Testament have all been put to music and besides there are numerous hymns, songs that do not come directly from the bible but have been written by believers over the years.

After every element of the service the congregation can sing a psalm or a hymn. It often forms a response to what God has just said.

After the reading of the law the congregation might sing a psalm or a hymn that forms a response to what God has said in the law. It might be a way for the congregation to acknowledge their sinfulness and ask God for forgiveness. It could also be a song that praises God for his law and expresses a desire to live according to it.

Bible reading

The bible reading is an important part of the service because in it God directly speaks to his people. The pastor or someone else reads one or more passages from the bible. Some of the

The church service

verses that are read usually form the passage that the preaching is based on.

The sermon

The sermon forms a large part of the service. In it the pastor explains a passage from the bible. He shows the congregation how Christ is speaking through that passage and what it means for their lives.

The sermon is important. We know from the bible that God uses preaching to bring people to faith in Him. In the book of Acts we read repeatedly how people come to faith after they have heard someone explain the bible.

God does not only use preaching to bring people to faith. He also wants to use it to strengthen the people who already believe in their faith. The members of the congregation cannot do without the weekly sermons. They need to hear again and again what God has done and they need to be reminded of his promises.

Baptism

Sometimes a service includes the sacrament of baptism. If someone has come to faith in Jesus Christ and wants to be baptised, he is asked a few questions. The pastor asks him if he believes in God, if he believes everything in the bible and if he wants to live as a child of God. When the new believer answers 'yes' to all these questions, he can be baptised. It is a sign that he is washed from his sins and that the Holy Spirit wants to live in his heart.

If an infant is baptised, the pastor asks the parents if they believe everything in the bible and if they promise to raise their child in a Christian way. If their answer is 'yes', their child is baptised. God promises through its baptism that the child belongs to Him.

Communion

Several times each year the congregation celebrates communion or the Lord's Supper in the service. Through it the church commemorates the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

The pastor first explains why Jesus wants believers to celebrate communion and what it means. After this explanation the congregation thanks God because He has saved them from death by punishing his Son in their place. Then the church takes communion.

The collection

In most reformed churches there will be a collection as part of the service. The members of the congregation know that everything they have comes from God, also their income. For that reason they want to give a part of what they have to God to show Him their gratefulness for all that He gives them. The money that is collected will sometimes go to those members of the congregation that are struggling with their finances, sometimes it will go to a mission* or charity.

The blessing

At the end of the church service the pastor blesses the congregation in the name of God. He may lift his hands as if in putting the blessing over the people's heads and say:

2 Corinthians 13:13 *'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'*

In the blessing God assures his children that He wants to be their God and they will be his people and that He will accompany them with his love. Again, the pastor may also use a different passage to speak God's blessing.

Questions

1. The church service could be seen as a conversation between God and his church.
 - a. In which parts of the service does God speak?
 - b. In which parts does the congregation speak?
2. The sermon is often regarded as the most important part of the service. Do you think that is correct? Explain.