

So What's the Good News?

THE CATECHIST'S GUIDE TO

READING THE GOSPELS

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Cover photo by Steve Mueller, *The Book of Kells* (Trinity College Library, Dublin).
The four symbolic figures represent the evangelists: Matthew/a winged angel,
Mark/a winged lion, Luke/a winged ox, John/an eagle.

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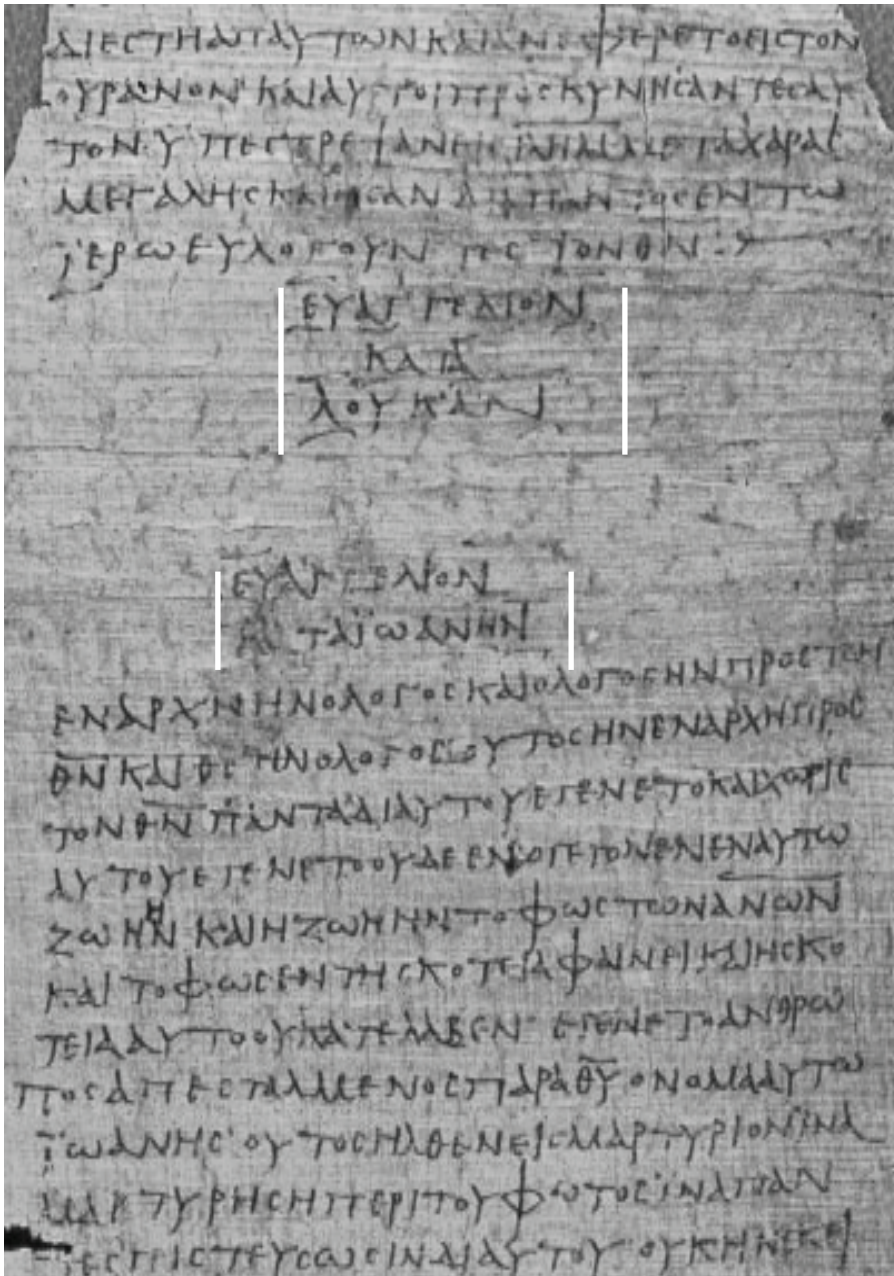
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AN EARLY GREEK PAPYRUS MANUSCRIPT, CA. AD 200

(Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV [p⁷⁵] from the Vatican Library)

The text shows the end of Luke's Gospel (ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΛΟΥΚΑΝ) and then the beginning of John's Gospel (ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ, 1:1-6).

The Catechist & the Gospels

“Read the Gospel. Read a passage of the Gospel every day and carry a little Gospel with you, in your pocket, in a purse, to keep it at hand. And there, reading a passage, you will find Jesus. Everything takes on meaning when you find your treasure there, in the Gospel. Jesus calls it ‘the kingdom of God,’ that is, God who reigns in your life, who is love, peace and joy in every person and in all persons. To read the Gospel is to find Jesus and to have Christian joy, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit.”

—POPE FRANCIS
Homily, July 27, 2014

As we know, the first words that the main character in a story speaks often give us clues about his character, thought and what he might be doing in the story. And so it is with Jesus. In the earliest written Gospel, that of Mark, Jesus’ first words reveal the key elements of his message and ministry: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent (be converted or changed, Greek: *metanoeite*), and believe (trust, give your loyalty to, Gk: *pisteuete*) in the good news” (1:14-15).

“Thanks be to the Gospel, by means of which we also, who did not see Christ when he came into this world, seem to be with him when we read his deeds.”

—ST. AMBROSE, BISHOP OF MILAN
Concerning Widows, #61

In this brief programmatic statement, Mark summarizes not only the announcement of the Good News that God was once again coming to rule over the house of Israel but also identifies the proper responses required in response—changing one’s life (conversion) because of this message and being loyal to God, the ruler in the community that God wanted. And it is around these four elements—the fulfillment of God’s plan, God’s forthcoming kingdom, the need for changing our minds and hearts, and how this constitutes “Good News”—that we can learn to read the Gospels more effectively and discover why Jesus’ message is “Good News.”

Focusing on these elements also helps us as catechists recognize what the Gospels are all about. As we will discover, although there is much about theology and morality in them, the Gospels are not abstract theological treatises or collections of moral guidelines. Rather, they are narratives that proclaim the Good News of our salvation by recounting the story of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life, death and resurrection are the foundation of our Christian way of relating to God. They are also our chief resources for learning who Jesus was and what his mission was. [For a more detailed consideration of this see my book *Who Do You Say I Am? The Catechist's Guide to Jesus in the Gospels* (Faith Alive Books, 2015)].

Moreover, although the Gospels are often represented as documents that we might use to invite others to become followers of Jesus—to *evangelize* as we say today—a careful reading reveals that the Gospels would be very hard to understand without some familiarity with Jesus' story and his expectations for his followers. In other words, the Gospels were not written to convert outsiders but as catechetical documents to deepen the faith of those who have already committed themselves to Jesus and his community by adopting his vision of the world, his values for living in it, and the vocation to continue his mission of bringing the Good News to others.

“At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life,’ and Christian living consists in following Christ. Accordingly, **the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ:** only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II

Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae) (1979), #5

So as we begin our examination of the Gospels, we must constantly keep in mind that they are the original Christian catechetical tools for the ongoing conversion of disciples who are trying to put on “the mind of Christ,” Phil 2:5) by following Jesus' example (Jn 13:15) so they can carry on Jesus' mission of “disciplining all nations” (Mt 28:19). They are the original and highly effective way that we have of fulfilling the task of all catechesis as emphasized by Pope St. John Paul II of putting “people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.”

Thus the goal of this book is to bring you into a closer and deeper relationship with Jesus through your reading, reflecting and responding to these Gospels and their message of Good News.

Craving for News

We live in a new and different world than ever before. And part of what makes our world so different is our addiction to “news.” Unlike any previous time in history, global electronic communication inundates us 24/7 with information about what is happening right now all over the world. But the real news that we as Christians are interested in is the Good News that we find presented in the four texts that we call our Gospels, which comes from the Greek word meaning good news.

Unlike readers today who presume that these Gospels are “objective” news reports (as if they were like video tapes of Jesus’ life) relating somehow only the “facts” about Jesus and his message, the ancient audience took for granted that these Gospels, like all speech and communication, had a persuasive agenda. They represent the Christian community’s memory and message—the Good News—about not only the fact but also the meaning or significance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as the pivotal events in the relationship of humanity and God.

“The proclamation of the gospel is not an ensemble of dogmas and regulations, but rather God’s message, addressed, in Christ, to us.”

—CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER (POPE BENEDICT XVI)
to the Synod of European Bishops (1991)

As we will discover, the Gospels were created to help Christians understand their Christian identity and learn how to be a Christian in a world that was not particularly Christian. So as we read and study the Gospels and let the power of God’s Good News work on us, we will also be challenged and changed as we deepen our Christian identity and renew our commitment to Jesus and the community of his followers.

What Makes Something News & Why It’s Good

In previous ages, although “news” was less immediate because it took much longer to arrive and was less extensive because its sources and distribution methods were more restricted, nevertheless the process of “news”

gathering and reporting was similar to today because people hungered to know about what was beyond the limits of their own personal and immediate experience. This desire to know more is the driving force of “news.” Perhaps the best way to understand what “news” is and what makes it “good” is to consider the dynamic process by which “news” is generated and thus illustrates what “news” is all about.

“News” is a process that generally consists of five distinct and necessary elements that also interact in a temporal sequence to produce it. Since it is a process, we must be careful not to confuse the distinctive elements or think that concentrating only on one element, such as the reporting alone, is enough to make something “news.” The basic elements of the “news” process are:

1. The Event

News always begins when something happens. If we happen to be present and witness the event, then it will not be “news” to us, though it might be “news” to others who were not there.

2. Our Absence

When the originating event occurs, it must be outside our direct experience. This is the real key to what makes something “news” because if I experienced the event itself, then I do not need to have someone report to me about something I witnessed. Since so much that happens is not within my direct experience, there is always a need to enlarge my experience by learning about these events beyond my immediate experience. Hence the need and desire for “news” about these events.

“Just as it takes real people to shape Jesus’ message, so it takes a ‘realistic’ or ‘connected narrative’ to make his message available to those who come along after the eyewitnesses with a need and a desire to see for themselves who this Jesus was.”

—JAN WOJCIK

The Road To Emmaus: Reading Luke’s Gospel (1989)

3. The Witness

For the “news” process to occur, there needs to be someone who did witness the event and so can share that experience with others, who can then in turn share it with even more persons. If something happens and there

are no witnesses, as trial lawyers know so well, then only conjectures, possible scenarios and theoretical reconstructions of the event are possible.

4. The Report

“News” occurs when the witness reports what happened in the event. The form of the report can be oral (for example face to face or over the phone or via television) or written (whether by hard copy in a memo or letter or newspaper or digitally in an e-mail, text message or over the Internet).

“We cannot know Jesus by direct observation. The lapse of historical time, if nothing else, makes that impossible. We have nothing written by his hand. We are dependent on the records and reports of others and can see him only through their eyes.”

—STEPHEN NEILL

in *The Jesus Book*, compiled & edited by Michael F. McCauley (1978)

The essential point is that we get the report in some form so we can learn both the facts of the event (the particulars as they are known and understood, often spelled out in the reporter’s handy guide for information: who, what, why, when, where, how?) and their significance to us (the meaning, often indicated by some presumption of its interest related to our needs or values). We must also be clear that the actual event is not the report, which is always secondary, removed from the event by time (after the fact) and distance (no longer at the scene), and thus is always derived from and dependent on the event itself.

5. Our Reception

The final stage in the “news” process is our reception. When we receive the report, we respond to the “news” of the reported event and in some way we are always changed either by its acceptance or rejection based on our evaluation, which is usually guided by our interest or need. When we learn some “news,” if it is interesting, helpful for our lives or significant for some reason, we consider it as “good news” and will usually accept the changes that might be required by accepting it. But if it is threatening or perceived as harmful to our lives or of no value then we will label it “bad news” and reject it or even try to prevent others from hearing it.

God’s Good News

Jesus’ announcement of God’s rule over our world and of the kingdom

community that will be open to everyone who accepted it, satisfies all the essential elements that make it “news” for us. The originating event of Jesus’ Good News is God’s hidden but now-being-revealed presence to rule over us, and so create a kingdom where that rule is effective. But this event, because it was beginning to be realized in Jesus’ words and deeds, is beyond our immediate experience and so is something that we yearn to know about but do not yet understand. As Jesus once told the Pharisees: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Lk 17:21).

“Jesus’ acts are the signs that God is on the move, the God of creation and of new creation. What he was doing with them was new. New in the same way that his vision of God’s kingdom was new. New because newness was what he was about. New exodus. New creation. New life, new hope. A new sense of the power and love of the one true God. Good news. But newness came at a price. Jesus saw that his good news would be bad news to people who had invested heavily in the old ways. He saw this opposition, this suspicion and hostility, and was confronting the powers that held people captive.”

—N. T. WRIGHT

Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good (2015)

The witness, of course, is Jesus who brings the report to us about what is beyond our experience but is now available to us through his mediation. He has experienced God’s powerful rule in himself and understands how perceiving and responding to it changed his life and will change others’ lives too. Once God’s powerful presence, God’s rule, has been acknowledged, nothing can ever be the same again.

The report or message that Jesus proclaims includes both the fact and the significance of God’s rule. The fact is that it is here already, just beginning to be realized and will continue to develop until everything finally comes under God’s rule. Its significance is that it both challenges all the familiar social relationships of domination that constitute our human world and also re-configures them in a new “kingdom” community that must be established, nurtured and maintained by his disciples.

The modern term for this characteristic of being already begun but not yet done is “eschatological” (Gk: *eschatos*, the end time of fulfillment)

toward which the process is moving). So although God's kingdom rule is not an already fully accomplished reality, persons are invited to respond to it by adopting Jesus' kingdom vision or worldview and then committing themselves to the vocation of realizing it in the kingdom community of those who will accept God's rule and live according to its guidelines.

Our reception is what happens after we hear the "news" of God's rule. If we understand Jesus' message as important and relevant for our lives, then God's rule will be "good news" and we will accept it, give our loyal commitment to it and change our lives accordingly. If, on the other hand, we see it as irrelevant or threatening, as many persons not only in the Gospels but also in today's world do, then it will be "bad news" and we will reject it, refuse our commitment and not change. In fact, we might even become actively hostile to make sure that its dangerous effects can't corrupt others or change the status quo of our comfortable world.

Rightly Understanding God's Good News

St. Paul reminds us that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). So likewise for us, our Christian lives begin with hearing God's Good News that Jesus announces to us. Moreover, since our Christian lives hinge on this Good News, it is crucial that we understand what this Good News is, so that we can shape our lives by it and not some "other gospel" (Gal 1:7). For this reason, we must learn what Jesus' Good news is (**information**) so that we can assimilate it and make it our own (**conformation**) so that it can change ourselves, our communities and our world (**transformation**) into the kind of world that God envisions.

Preparing to Read & Study the Gospels

What kind of conclusions would we draw if we approached the Gospels not simply as containers for God's revelation (thus a "deposit" of theology!) but with the premise that not only the content or message but also the form in which the Gospel is proclaimed is crucial for understanding the meaning that God wants to reveal to us? In other words, the form or way that the message is expressed is an essential part of God's revelation. If we adopt this approach, then we will recognize that:

- The Gospels do not just inform us but challenge us to respond to what we are reading and make its vision and values our own.
- Reading the Gospels directs and molds us as Christians (His story is our story!). We must be participants in what we read and not just interested spectators. When we read the Gospels to discover their meaning for us and our lives, we are confronted with a spiritual urgency that requires our complete involvement.

Contexts of Meaning: The Three Worlds of the Gospel

Because the meaning of any word or a text depends on its context, to read a text for its meaning means paying close attention to the contexts in which the text is read. (For more on this see *The Catechist's Guide to Reading Your Bible*, [Faith Alive Books, 2014] especially pp. 39-50, 135-156.) Since every text has three contexts or worlds of meaning, our strategy for Gospel reading must attend to each of these contexts if we are going to get the most out of our engagement with the Gospel texts.

“Each narrative, fictional or historical, provides an alternative story set in a created ‘world’ that is itself an fresh alternative to the ‘world’ or ‘worlds’ previously serving as the boundaries of the reader’s imagination.”

—WAYNE BOOTH

The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (1988)

The World Behind The Text: The Author & His Audience

This is the historical, cultural, social and literary situation in which the original authors and audiences lived, c. AD 65-95 in the Roman empire. This “world” controls the Gospel’s meaning because it was in this situation and in response to the pressing problems of the original audiences that the authors first composed their Gospel texts. We must first ask what their texts *meant then* to the author and these original audiences.

The World of the Text: Jesus & His Disciples

This is the Gospel’s narrative story as a whole, describing the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth c. AD 27 to 30 in Roman Palestine. Each author shaped his version in a particular way to make the desired impression on his readers and transform their lives as Jesus’ disciples. Here we must notice the literary form of the text as a narrative and

the various techniques that the author uses to achieve his intended results. In a narrative this includes the choice of the beginning, the dramatic action, the plot, character, settings, images, themes and rhetorical strategies (e.g., irony, ambiguity, repetitions, allusions, gaps, echoes, humor, etc.).

The World in Front of the Text: Readers Then & Now

This is the situation of later readers like ourselves who attempt to apply the meanings to their own lives and the problems of their culture and world. In reading the Gospels, we do not just want information about Jesus and his Good News. We want to use his example and his message to shape our lives as his followers—as Christ-ians.

“What is happening in imaginative literature such as a story and poem is the creation of worlds alternative to our own present reality. If we are fascinated into acknowledging the alternative world as part, at least, of what we want to have as our own real world, two horizons merge; that of our prior world and that of the alternative world. In religious language, this is called ‘hearing’ Scripture.”

—D. J. A. CLINES

“Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980)

The Three Worlds of Gospel Text & the Three Parts of This Book

The goal of my book then is to explore with you the meaning and the implications of Jesus’ Good News that the forthcoming kingdom of God is here by reading the four Gospel accounts of this life-changing message. The main goal is to encourage you to read the Gospels themselves and engage with them to begin understanding their message and how that message can change your life and the lives of those around you.

The overall format of the book follows the general pattern of the three worlds of the Gospel text outlined above. In **Part 1, God’s Good News, Chapters 1-4** offer some basic information about the **world behind the text**, that is, information about the first-century world of the original authors and their audiences. This information describes their world in general, which was so very different from ours in culture and mentality that a broad grasp of its essentials is important for a better understanding of the Gospels.

Chapter 1 briefly examines the first-century Mediterranean social

world of Jesus and the first Christians by noting its agrarian character and its subjugation under the domination system of the Roman empire. We describe the four basic organizational and institutional patterns of their social experience—the realms of kinship (families), politics (nations), economics (goods) and religion (gods). Then we explain their historical situation, in particular the fundamental Yahwist worldview and the competing agendas of five groups—the Priests, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots and Jesus and his followers—that were seeking to reform first-century Judaism and advocating for the best way to live their covenant obligations.

“The past is not only distant, it is in various ways a different world. The basic experiences are different from ours, yet they seemed to the people who experienced them then to be so normal that they did not record things that we would consider to be strange and particularly interesting.”

—BERNARD BAILLYN

On the Teaching and Writing of History (1994)

Chapter 2 examines the meaning and content of Jesus’ message that God’s kingdom rule is here. We first explore its biblical roots and then how it embodies Jesus’ new vision and alternative worldview that can provide the basis for our Christian identity and the guidelines for a new type of community. Once we grasp the content of his kingdom message, we can recognize how this message challenges those who want to accept it.

Chapter 3 spells out what happens when we adopt Jesus’ vision or worldview as our own and commit ourselves to realizing it in his alternative kingdom community. If, as Jesus claims, God indeed rules as our Lord (Lat: *dominus*) then not only our personal lives and loyalties must to be reoriented and changed, but the social and cultural institutions of the four social realms must also be reordered. Thus, if God rules, then the father of the family (household) doesn’t (the kinship realm); if God rules, then Caesar doesn’t (the political realm); if God rules, then the rich don’t (the economic realm); if God rules, then the Judean priests and Temple authorities don’t (the religious realm); and finally if God rules, then Satan and other gods don’t (the cosmic realm).

Chapter 4 explores the reasons why the four different versions of the Gospel were composed and written down, revised, added to and taken in

a different direction by each of the evangelists in the last third of the first century. This allows some brief considerations about why the Gospels are similar and yet also why they are quite different from one another.

After these preliminary chapters with background about the New Testament world, **Part 2, The Good News in Four Versions, Chapters 5-8** examines **the world of the text** for each Gospel, i.e., the particular way that each Gospel proclaims the Good News of our salvation as it is realized in Jesus and his ministry. Guided by the six necessary questions that ground the historical-critical method of modern biblical scholarship (author, audience, situation, form, content, function), each chapter considers the particular historical background information about the author, his audience and the situation that gave rise to the need for that Gospel, followed by a critical analysis of the Gospel's structure, style and relation to the other Gospels, together with a brief summary of each author's distinctive portrait of Jesus and of the disciples. Then I offer a brief *Reading Guide* to help you through your initial reading of each Gospel as a complete story and conclude with a final reflection on why it remains important for us to read that Gospel today. Reading the Gospels themselves and engaging with them directly is the only sure way to begin to understand their life-changing message and how that message can change your life.

“Evangelization should not be seen primarily as the communication of doctrine or even a ‘message.’ It means introducing people to a blessed and liberating union with the Lord Jesus, who lives in the community that cherishes his memory and invokes his spirit. To evangelize, in the catholic understanding of the terms, is never a matter of mere words. It is an invitation to others to enter the community of disciples and to participate in the new consciousness that discipleship alone can bring.”

—AVERY DULLES, SJ
A Church to Believe In (1982)

Part 3, Good News that Stays News, chapters 9-12 focus on **the world in front of the text**, that is, our response to each Gospel and how we might apply what we have learned to our own lives today.

Chapter 9 considers how Jesus' Good News and the kingdom worldview it embodies serve as the basic Christian vision and the foundation of our Christian vocation as disciples. We explore in greater detail the essential aspects of a discipleship spirituality which demands adopting

Jesus' worldview as our own (the challenge of conversion) and then sharing that worldview with others (the challenge of evangelization). Since our Christian conversion requires re-imagining and reordering our lives, our relationships and our communities according to God's rule by shaping our own discipleship spirituality, we must rely on what we learn from the Gospels as the primary source for this discipleship spirituality. And since our vocation to evangelization moves us to share Jesus' Good News, we must use the Gospels to make sure that we have understood his message so we can communicate it to others. The chapter ends with practical suggestions about how to shape your own gospel spirituality.

Chapter 10 offers information and suggestions about various scholarly resources that can help you continue your exploration of the Gospels through both reading and study. This includes information about various Bible translations, methods and approaches for biblical interpretation, including a basic method for doing comparisons of the synoptic Gospels, and finally suggestions for how to create your own version of "the gospel according to you!"

"The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others."

—*POPE FRANCIS*

The Joy of the Gospel (2013), #264

Chapter 11 offers suggestions for using a eucharistic format to share the Good News through your personal reflection, with members of your household or with a faith sharing or Bible study group. Questions for your personal reflection and/or for small group discussion are also provided for each chapter of this book.

Finally, **Chapter 12** offers a brief glossary of several important terms related to our Gospel reading and study.

This book, then, is a chance to engage with the Gospels and to think about your own spirituality by seeing it against the spiritualities offered by the evangelists and to take from the Gospels what you need to become

a more faithful follower of Jesus. The goal is nicely expressed by St. Paul: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

By engaging with the Gospels through your reading, reflection, study and prayer, you are invited to use your imagination to enter into Jesus’ story, to make that story your own, to enter into a world that is very different from our own and ask: What if that vision of the world described by Jesus in the Gospel is true? What if his story as the Christ becomes the pattern for my story as a Christ-ian? What if, as Jesus proclaims, “The kingdom of God is here?”

“What the gospel writers wrote could only be grasped through imagination. Their message was a source of vision rather than a deposit of doctrine. When we move beyond the confines of ‘either/or,’ ‘is/is not,’ and cross the threshold into the world of ‘both/and,’ ‘what if?,’ the message of the gospel can indeed become good news to our weary hearts.”

—NORTHROP FRYE

Educating the Imagination: the Double Vision (1991)

What happens when we discover God’s awesome, mysterious, powerful transforming presence? What happens when that powerful presence is found in our own lives and hearts? If we do, then we know that the time of decision is at hand and to shape and reshape our whole lives will be our way of responding to this Good News.

So let us now begin our consideration of God’s Good News, always remembering Jesus’ advice to his disciples as they tried to unravel his teaching in parables about the mystery of God’s kingdom:

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

“Pay attention to what you hear.” (Mk 4:23-24)