

3. The Birth of the King

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:1-2)

His real name is not Jesus. That's a Greek version, *Iesous*, a transliteration of his name. His Aramaic birth name was Yeshua, a short version of the name Joshua (in Hebrew Yehoshua). His parents would have called him Yeshu – the shortened, Galilean version of Yeshua. This was a very common name – the sixth most popular name among Jews of the time. The name Jesus sounds strange to us. But it is Joshua. Or Josh. Yeshu, the son of Yehosef and Miriam.

The story of his birth is, of course, one of the most famous stories in the world and the foundation of our Christmas celebrations. The early church, however, didn't consider it quite as important: the story only occurs in Luke and Matthew, and both writers include different details. They agree that Jesus' parents were called Mary and Joseph, that he was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod I (a.k.a. Herod the Great), that he ended up living in Nazareth, and that the birth had a whiff of scandal. Matthew states it simply: "... but before they lived together, [Mary] was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). Luke has a

more elaborate account, with an angel appearing to Mary and telling her that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” and that the child “will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

This, according to the Gospel accounts, is no ordinary baby.

INCARNATION

This is a key Christian idea about Jesus: that he was the incarnation of God. John wrote that “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Incarnation means to appear in person, in the flesh. Christians claim – based on the Gospels – that God took human form and lived among us in the shape of Jesus. And this is reflected in another name which is applied to Jesus: Emmanuel, which means “God with us”.

Some of the most familiar elements of the Christmas story are not actually in the Gospel accounts. The stable is never mentioned, and there’s no inn, either. The word in Luke’s account which is traditionally translated as “inn” actually means guest room, or spare room, or anywhere you might put visitors. In peasant homes of the times, the animals were brought indoors at night and the manger was in the lower

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section of the house. So the stable of a crowded peasant home was for a baby except for the animals.

Similarly, although we are three kings, the Bible never says or that there were three of the three wise men – the word is priests from the Persian empire.

We don’t know the exact date in the West we celebrate it on. The date was not agreed upon until the 4th century. Earlier writers suggested November 25. The year is uncertain. We know from the Gospels that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. We know that it took place while Herod was “about thirty” when he died (Luke 3:23).

The date of Herod’s death is uncertain, but it was probably 4 BC. Jesus was born a little while before that, so it makes sense to assume that Jesus was born in 5/early 4 BC. If Jesus’ baptism was in 29 AD, as some scholars have suggested, Jesus would have been thirty-two at his baptism, which is consistent with John’s “about thirty” when he was baptized. Notice Jesus was actually born before Christ! This is because the calendar BC and AD actually miscalculates the date.

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section of the house. So the scenario that Luke paints is of a crowded peasant home where there was no room for a baby except for the animals' feeding trough.

Similarly, although we are familiar with the idea of three kings, the Bible never says that they were kings, or that there were three of them. Matthew's account talks of wise men – the word is *magi* – which indicates priests from the Persian empire in the east.

We don't know the exact date of his birth. Although in the West we celebrate it on 25 December, that date was not agreed upon until the fourth century AD. Earlier writers suggested November. Even the exact year is uncertain. We know from the Gospels that he was born during the reign of Augustus (Luke 2:1), that it took place while Herod was still alive, and that he was "about thirty" when he began his public work (Luke 3:23).

The date of Herod's death is generally agreed to be 4 BC. Jesus was born a little while before Herod's death, so it makes sense to assume that Jesus was born in late 5/early 4 BC. If Jesus' baptism took place in the autumn of AD 29, as some scholars have suggested, then he would have been thirty-two at the time. This fits pretty well with John's "about thirty" description. (You'll notice Jesus was actually born several years BC – before Christ! This is because the monk who invented BC and AD actually miscalculated the dates.)

Joseph and Mary were probably young: the usual age for a Jewish girl to be married was between thirteen and sixteen, and for boys not much older.

And they were poor. We know this because after Jesus' birth, they go to the Temple and sacrifice two pigeons. Pigeons were allowed as a sacrifice if you couldn't afford a lamb or a goat. Also, when Mary hears of his birth, she sings a song celebrating the triumph of the poor and the humble. Known as *The Magnificat*, the song celebrates the fact that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52–53). This song makes no sense at all unless Mary – and the man she was to marry – was "lowly", poor, and even hungry.

According to Matthew, when Herod the Great found out that there was a rumoured "prince" being born in Bethlehem, he sent soldiers to kill the children. Although some historians have questioned this event, from what we know of Herod, such a thing is entirely in fitting with his character. This was a man who murdered two of his sons and one of his wives, who ruled through terror, violence, and political cunning.

Matthew's Gospel records that Jesus escaped south, into Egypt, returning when Herod died. When Joseph and Mary returned, they discovered that Herod's son Archelaus had inherited the southern part of the kingdom. Archelaus was, if anything, more brutal than his father. So they went back to Nazareth.

The area would have been devastated. In the aftermath of Herod's death, his sons Archelaus and Antipater went to Rome to argue over the terms of their father's will. While they were away, disorder broke out

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in Judea and Galilee. The Romans marching in and crushing the rebels were taken as slaves in punishment for the city of Sepphoris – only three miles away – was destroyed. In Judea, the легион Varus had some two thousand rebels

So Jesus must have grown up surrounded by memories of violence and death, of slavery. His life was lived, like that of the occupied countries, against a backdrop of

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Joseph, the brother of James and Josaphat, and Simon, and are not his sisters?" (Mark 6:3)

We know two things about Jesus' parents: he was circumcised and he wore a prayer shawl. He was, in other words, a Jew.

His father, Joseph, is described as an upright or "righteous" man (Matthew 1:19). We know that Jesus went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover (Luke 2:41). His parents had him circumcised and had him named, and then, following his birth, they took him to the Temple in Jerusalem for Mary's purification.

Nazareth was an insignificant place, situated on a ridge above the surrounding valley. The town probably numbered not more than a thousand people. There was nothing that we would recognise as a market economy. Instead, each household

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in Judea and Galilee. The Romans restored order by marching in and crushing the revolt. Thousands of Jews were taken as slaves in punishment, and most of the city of Sepphoris - only three miles from Nazareth - was destroyed. In Judea, the legate of Syria, P. Quintilius Varus had some two thousand rebels crucified.

So Jesus must have grown up surrounded by memories of violence and death, of families sold into slavery. His life was lived, like those of all citizens of occupied countries, against a background hum of fear.

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3)

We know two things about Jesus' physical appearance: he was circumcised and he wore a fringed Jewish prayer shawl. He was, in other words, Jewish.

His father, Joseph, is described as a devout Jew - an upright or "righteous" man (Matthew 1:19). We know that Jesus went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe the Passover (Luke 2:41). His parents circumcised him and had him named, and then, forty days after his birth, they took him to the Temple to be dedicated and for Mary's purification.

Nazareth was an insignificant place. Perched on a ridge above the surrounding countryside, it probably numbered not more than 400 people. There was nothing that we would recognize as a modern market economy. Instead, each household grew and

consumed its own produce. In the shared family courtyard there would be an oven, a millstone for grinding wheat, and a cistern for storing water. The village provided a communal wine press and olive press. Families could be self-sufficient, owning a field, some sheep and goats, chickens, a donkey, and perhaps a cow. They would have olive and fruit trees: figs, pomegranates, and a vegetable garden for leeks, lentils, beans, peas, cucumbers, onions and garlic. Prosperity? Prosperity was owning your own vine.

Clothing was simple. Colours were a luxury. Most clothes were in muted colours, natural dyes. Men wore a *chiton* – a word which is often translated as “coat” but which is a basic undergarment, something nearer to what we would call a shirt. Later in life we know that Jesus had a tunic which was woven in one piece (John 19:23). On top of that they wore an oblong piece of cloth which served as a cloak in the daytime, and could be wrapped around as a blanket at night. For special occasions, or in richer families, you might wear a robe – a posher garment with sleeves. This was a sign of distinction. In Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, the father dresses his son in a robe. This was tied with a sash or a belt. And they wore sandals on their feet.

Jesus grew up in a Jewish village. He attended synagogue, learned Hebrew, read the Torah. He lived among ordinary people living ordinary lives. And the farmers, the builders, the workshops, vineyards, and fishermen of Galilee all gave him the images with which he was to fill his stories of the kingdom of God.

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Jesus was not an only child and at least two sisters. His brothers (James, Joses, Simon and Judas, as “James” is actually Jacob.) had Jewish names.

We can’t be sure how much he had. Formal education was rare throughout the ancient world, so why you needed scribes. Very few could read, but even those – “teacher” – he does not appear to have had formal training: later on, people learned his learning. He would have learned the traditions of the Jewish faith, to recite them, to be a devout man, Joseph may have had to learn at the synagogue and to work with the local scribe. Gifted children in families might take their studies to a rabbinical school, to sit at the feet of the law. But Jesus never did. He became a man at thirteen years old and gave up his father’s trade.

Although translated as “carpenter”, the word used to describe Joseph, is *tekton*, which means a carpenter who was also a general builder, including a stonemason and mason. The Christian writer, Justin Martyr, claimed that Jesus worked with oxen and yokes (Justin was born in the region). It is likely, as well, that Jesus worked on the building sites in Jerusalem.

produce. In the shared family there would be an oven, a millstone for grinding grain and a cistern for storing water. The community would have a communal wine press and olive oil mill. They would be self-sufficient, owning a few sheep and goats, chickens, a donkey, and so on. They would have olive and fruit trees: figs, grapes, and a vegetable garden for leeks, onions, cucumbers, onions and garlic. True prosperity was owning your own vine. For example. Colours were a luxury. Most people could only afford natural dyes. Men wore a tunic which is often translated as 'shirts'. It was a basic undergarment, something like a t-shirt. Women would call a shirt. Later in life we would have a tunic which was woven in one piece. On top of that they wore an oblong shawl which served as a cloak in the daytime, and could be wrapped around as a blanket at night. In poorer families, or in richer families, you might have a shawl with sleeves. This was the 'shawl'. In Jesus' story of the prodigal son, the father dressed his son in a robe. This was tied with a belt and they wore sandals on their feet. Jesus grew up in a Jewish village. He attended school and learned Hebrew, read the Torah. He lived among people living ordinary lives. And the workers, the workshops, vineyards, and fields all gave him the images with which he told his stories of the kingdom of God.

Jesus was not an only child. He had four brothers and at least two sisters. His brothers were called James, Joses, Simon and Judas. (The word we translate as "James" is actually Jacob.) These are good, solid, Jewish names.

We can't be sure how much formal learning Jesus had. Formal education was rare and literacy rates throughout the ancient world were very low – that is why you needed scribes. We know that Jesus could read, but even though he was called rabbi – "teacher" – he does not appear to have had any formal training: later on, people were surprised at his learning. He would have learned the foundations of the Jewish faith, to recite the traditional prayers. As a devout man, Joseph may have encouraged his sons to learn at the synagogue and to study the Torah with the local scribe. Gifted children from well-off families might take their studies further and go to a rabbinical school, to sit at the feet of the teachers of the law. But Jesus never did this. Instead, when he became a man at thirteen years and a day, he took up his father's trade.

Although translated as "carpenter", the word used to describe Joseph, is *tekton*, which means someone who was also a general builder, a construction worker, including a stonemason and metalworker. A later writer, Justin Martyr, claimed that Jesus made ploughs and yokes (Justin was born in Samaria, so knew the region). It is likely, as well, that he and his father worked on the building sites in Sepphoris, since the

city was being rebuilt by Antipas during those years.

The Roman Empire had ratified the will of Herod the Great and split the kingdom into four. Archelaus had control of Judea and Samaria, but proved so hideously inept that the Romans removed him from power and controlled the area through their own leader, a procurator, and the high priests in Jerusalem. Philip got Trachonitis and Batea; Antipas was called "tetrarch" – literally "ruler of one quarter of a kingdom" – and given the Perea and Galilee. The final part was known as the Decapolis: a federation of ten cities.

The fact that he was engaged in a manual trade, or even that he came from a poor background doesn't mean that Jesus was uneducated. Rabbis and sages of his day were not academics, but worked in a trade. Labour brought you some measure of independence. Shemaiah, a scribe from the generation before Jesus, said, "Love labour and hate mastery and seek not acquaintance with the ruling power."

Or, as the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner's translation has it: "Love work, hate authority, don't get friendly with the government."

4. The Kingdom of

"John the baptizer appeared in proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1: 9) Mark's Gospel begins not with the birth of Jesus, but with John the Baptist – or John the Evangelist, as he is sometimes known.

He is a fiery, Old Testament figure, like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who called people in the wilderness. The key difference is that Elijah was a priest, he came from a priestly family, but John wasn't a priest. Instead, he was a prophet, who lived outside the religious structures, away from the temple. His message was that only by calling people into the wilderness and asking for repentance could Israel escape the judgment of God and the Lord.

John's disregard for the religious establishment becomes clear when we see that he baptizes people who, in other fields, were beyond the law. These included tax collectors (who were not exempt from military duty, the Romans), Gentiles (non-Jews), and even soldiers (who were exempt from military duty, the Romans). We know as well that at least one person he baptizes in Samaritan country.

INSTANT EXPERT: JESUS

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4. The Kingdom of God

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Mark's Gospel begins not with the birth of Jesus, but with John the Baptist – or John the Baptizer as he is sometimes known.

He is a fiery, Old Testament figure who dressed like the Old Testament prophet Elijah and baptized people in the wilderness. The key to John is what he wasn't. His father was a priest, he came from a priestly family, but John wasn't a priest. Instead he worked outside the religious structures, away from the Temple, calling people into the wilderness to repent. Only by repentance could Israel escape the coming wrath of the Lord.

John's disregard for the religious authorities becomes clear when we see that he baptized people who, in other fields, were beyond the pale. Prostitutes came to him. Tax collectors. Soldiers (and since Jews were exempt from military duty, these must have been Gentiles). We know as well that at one point he was baptizing in Samaritan country.

John was a truly radical figure who sometimes gets sidelined in Christian history. He prepared the way for Jesus, but we should not see him purely as some kind of warm-up act. John had a strong, urgent message of his own: repent. He called for repentance not only from ordinary people, but also from the ruling elite. Herod Antipas had eloped with the wife of one of his many stepbrothers. In John's eyes this constituted incest and thus made the ruler of Galilee impure.

Not, perhaps, the kind of thing a ruler wants to hear...

Sometime in AD 29, Jesus was baptized by John. This is one of the events in Jesus' life which all scholars agree to be genuine. Since his followers came to believe Jesus was without sin, the fact that he was baptized – an act of repentance for sin – would never have been invented by Christians.

So why was he baptized? Some see it as an act of solidarity with ordinary people. Others see it as signalling a new movement, a new period in his life. Baptism, after all, came to symbolize death and rebirth for Christians. Perhaps this was the death of Jesus' old life, with all its duties and obligations, and the beginning of something new. Others see it as confirmation: at Jesus' baptism, "... he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11). It was a confirmation of who he was and what his purpose was.

4. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

After the baptism, though, Jesus went into the wilderness. There, during which time he was

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9. Jesus was baptized by John. This is in Jesus' life which all scholars agree. Since his followers came to him without sin, the fact that he was called to repentance for sin – would never be understood by Christians.

Was he baptized? Some see it as an act of ordinary people. Others see it as a rite of passage, a new period in his life, came to symbolize death and rebirth. Perhaps this was the death of the old, all its duties and obligations, and the beginning of something new. Others see it as Jesus' baptism, "... he saw the heavens open, the Spirit descending like a dove on him from heaven, 'You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10–11). The question of who he was and what his

After the baptism, though, Jesus was "driven out" by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he fasted for forty days, during which time he was tempted by Satan.

Satan means tester, accuser. And he tests Jesus in three specific ways. First he says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread" (Luke 4:3); then he promises that if Jesus worships him, he will hand Jesus authority over the cities of the earth; finally he tries to tempt Jesus to throw himself down from the high point of the Temple and call the angels to save him. Jesus is offered food to satisfy his hunger; he is offered worldly power; and the final temptation – to show everyone who he really was.

Jesus rejects all of the temptations, countering the devil's use of Scripture with Scriptures quotations of his own. And he returns from the wilderness having faced down the accuser.

Even then he does not set straight off into his mission. Instead he seems to have worked with John the Baptist for a while, baptizing in the southern Jordan while John moved into territory upstream.

This came to an end when Herod Antipas finally tired of John's invective against him. John was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually beheaded. The arrest seems to have been the trigger for Jesus to move back to Galilee and start his main mission.

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15).

Jesus was not a politically neutral figure. He did not just go around "doing good". He was opposed by virtually every power group he met: Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Temple authorities, scribes, and, of course, the Romans. Why would they do that, if all he was doing was "good deeds"?

The reason is that he was actually proclaiming something far more radical, more dangerous. He believed that his purpose was to bring in a new kingdom: the kingdom of God.

The arrival of the kingdom of God is the key message of Jesus' mission. The phrase "kingdom of God" (or Matthew's preferred alternative of "kingdom of heaven") occurs eighty-five times in the Gospels: thirty-seven in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, and thirty-two in Luke. John only uses the phrase twice, which might lead us to think that he was omitting something, but he uses an alternative phrase: "eternal life". (Actually Jesus uses this phrase in the other Gospels as well.) In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Abundant life is a hallmark of the kingdom of God.

This thread actually runs through the entire Bible. Although the phrase is never explicitly used in the

4. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Old Testament, it frequently speaks of God reigning not only over Israel but over the whole world. It has been suggested that an alternative title for the whole Bible could be "the story of the kingdom of God".

Jesus wanted everyone to have a share in the kingdom of God. The essence of the kingdom is to do God's will, to do the will of the king. Jesus taught his followers to pray "Your kingdom come. Your will be done. Your will be in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The kingdom of God on earth is not yet here. It is not done.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

It is known as the Lord's Prayer, although the name was not given to it until the 4th century AD. It is really the disciples' prayer, appearing in two forms in the Gospels: a longer one in Matthew and a shorter one in Luke. It was taught in an early church discipleship manual called the Didache (which means teaching). The Didache was adopted as a significant, specific prayer early on. Tertullian, an early church father, described it as "the epitome of the whole gospel".

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Abundant life runs through the entire Bible. The word "kingdom" is never explicitly used in the

Old Testament, it frequently speaks of God as a king, reigning not only over Israel but over the whole world. It has been suggested that an alternative title for the whole Bible could be "the story of the coming of the kingdom of God".

Jesus wanted everyone to have access to God. To live in the kingdom of God was to accept the rule of God: the essence of a kingdom is that people there do the will of the king. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The kingdom of God on earth is where God's will is done.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

It is known as the Lord's Prayer, although that name was not given to it until the third century AD. It is really the disciples' prayer. It features in two forms in the Gospels: a longer form in Matthew and a shorter one in Luke. It also features in an early church discipleship manual called the Didache (which means teaching) showing that it was adopted as a significant, special prayer very early on. Tertullian, an early church writer, called it "the epitome of the whole gospel".

Jews believed in the kingdom of God, but that it would only come when the messiah expelled the Romans

and inaugurated a new golden age on the day of the Lord. But Jesus said that the kingdom was not only coming, it had already arrived. It was here, now, and open to everyone. No one was excluded. In fact, the lowest rungs of society were specifically welcomed in. Beggars feature heavily in the Gospels. Widows as well, and children. Then there are the lepers, the demon-possessed. These are low status, powerless, often outcast and marginalized individuals. Though members of the aristocracy and the elite appear in the Gospels, most of the cast is made up from the lowest levels of society. The good news of Jesus was, above all, good news for the poor. Jesus told them that God cared for them and knew all about them. God, he said, even knew the number of hairs on their heads.

The great Jewish story told how God chose his people, rescued them, loved them, and would, through them, eventually become the God of all the nations. Jesus proclaimed himself the climax of that story. The kingdom was here, the kingdom was active, the kingdom was personal, and the kingdom had room for everyone.

And that made the kingdom dangerous. In a world ruled by the Romans and their client kings, to advocate joining another kingdom was subversive and seditious. Only the Romans could make someone a king. It is worth noting that, when the Romans came to execute Jesus, the charge sheet pinned above his cross was the single title: King of the Jews.

4. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He passed through Nazareth and made his home by the lake..." (Matthew 4:12)
After John's arrest, Jesus went north and made his home in the fishing town of Capernaum on the north shore of Lake Galilee. There he found the first disciples, Simon and Andrew. Jesus finds them fishing in Lake Galilee and calls them from their nets to become his disciples. He promises them that from now on they will catch more than fish. This was not the first time Jesus had called people to follow him. According to John's Gospel, Jesus had called Peter and Andrew to follow him when he was with John the Baptist. Jesus left his nets and followed him.

DISCIPLES

Jesus called many people into his movement – the Greek word is *mathetes* – a learner. Rabbis had disciples, small groups of students who learned by observing, imitating him, and by discussing his teaching with him. Jesus adopts the same approach. His followers – and are – expected to imitate him and become like him. Jesus is Christlike. Discipleship was an active movement. Jesus called people to movement and told them to follow him. Fishermen left their nets and followed him. A tax collector came out from his toll booth and followed him.

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After John's arrest, Jesus went north to Galilee. He made his home in the fishing town of Capernaum, on the north shore of Lake Galilee. There he called his first disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John. Jesus finds them fishing in Lake Galilee and calls them from their nets to become his disciples, promising them that from now on they will catch people, rather than fish. This was not the first time he had met them: according to John's Gospel, Jesus met them in Judea, when he was with John the Baptist. But now they left their nets and followed him.

DISCIPLES

Jesus called many people into discipleship. Disciple – the Greek word is *mathetes* – means apprentice, learner. Rabbis had disciples, small groups of students who learned by observing the rabbi and imitating him, and by discussing the Torah with him. Jesus adopts the same approach: his disciples were – and are – expected to imitate him, to be Christlike. Discipleship was an active commitment. Jesus called people to movement, to literally follow him. Fishermen left their nets; Levi the tax collector came out from his toll booth.

Jesus chose twelve core disciples. The number is symbolic, reminding Jews of the twelve tribes of Israel – Jesus' mission was for all Israel. The twelve included four fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot – a political radical. Some of them were relatives of Jesus (James and John were very likely his cousins). Some were married men. There was an inner circle of three: Peter, James, and John, who saw Jesus during some of his most crucial moments.

Along with them there was a much wider group of disciples. Jesus sent seventy of these on missions throughout Galilee. There were also "hidden" disciples, including Nicodemus in Jerusalem, and women – Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, wife of a high-ranking official at the court of Herod Antipas. Although they are never called "disciple", they did many of the same things that the men did. In one famous story, another Mary sits at Jesus' feet while he is speaking, much to the annoyance of her sister, Martha. This is often seen as a contrast between the contemplative life (Mary) and the active life (Martha), but Mary is actually adopting the classic pose of a rabbinic disciple and sitting at the feet of her rabbi. She is staking her claim to be a disciple. Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, also offered Jesus a place to stay. Jesus stayed with them at Bethany during the last week of his life, and may have made other visits there as well.

There are signs that the number of Jesus' followers declined in the latter part of his ministry. It was clear that he wasn't the type of teacher they thought he was going to be, because the cost was too great.

Jesus' home in Capernaum was probably that of Simon and Andrew. In the ruins of the town, archaeologists have found what they call "the dwellings", consisting of a central building surrounded by a number of houses. The courtyards allowed access to the rooms, which were made of beams, covered with mud – in one famous incident, the mud walls of Jesus' house collapsed, and the roof, hacked through the mud, allowed an invalid friend on a stretcher for Jesus to enter. One of these houses was later converted into a very good candidate for the house of Jesus in Galilee and the place which Jesus chose to live in.

welve core disciples. The number of these twelve tribes of Israel was for all Israel. The twelve apostles were: Peter, a fisherman, a tax collector, a zealot – and a leper. Some of them were relatives of Jesus (John was very likely his cousin). They were all men. There was an inner circle of three: Peter, James, and John, who saw Jesus through his most crucial moments. In addition to them there was a much wider circle of followers. Jesus sent seventy of these men throughout Galilee. There were many more disciples, including Nicodemus in the crowd of women – Mary Magdalene, and Lazarus, a high-ranking official at the court of Herod. Although they are never called apostles, they did many of the same things that Jesus did. In one famous story, another Mary (not the one who was listening while he is speaking, much to the chagrin of her sister, Martha. This is often confused with the contemplative life of Jesus, but Mary is shown in the classic pose of a rabbinic student, sitting at the feet of her rabbi. She is shown to be a disciple. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, also offered Jesus a place to stay with them at Bethany for a week of his life, and may have stayed there as well.

There are signs that the number of disciples declined in the latter part of his mission, when it was clear that he wasn't the type of messiah they thought he was going to be. Some fell away because the cost was too great.

Jesus' home in Capernaum was probably in the house of Simon and Andrew. In the ruins of Capernaum, archaeologists have found what they call "clan-dwellings", consisting of a central courtyard surrounded by a number of houses. Stairs within the courtyards allowed access to the roofs. The roofs were made of beams, covered with layers of packed mud – in one famous incident, the crowds around Jesus were so intense that some men climbed up to the roof, hacked through the mud, and lowered their invalid friend on a stretcher for Jesus to heal him. One of these houses was later converted into a church. It's a very good candidate for the house of Simon Peter in Galilee and the place which Jesus called home.

5. A Day in the Life of the King

There is an account in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel – echoed in Matthew and Luke – which shows a kind of "day in the life". This is the first time that Jesus comes to public notice, and it is a kind of microcosm of all his work. It contains many of the elements that were to make him famous: teaching, exorcisms, healing, sharing meals, the adulation of the crowds, and his blatant disregard for religious convention. It gives an insight into why people found him so compelling, so intriguing, so attractive, so irresponsible, and even so infuriating.

"They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." (Mark 1:22)

It starts on the Sabbath. Jesus goes to the synagogue in Capernaum where he begins teaching. People are amazed by the power and authority of his words.

Jesus was a brilliant – and highly unorthodox – teacher. He had no formal training and, although some of his teaching took place in synagogues, Jesus often taught on the move: walking around Galilee. A lot of teaching happened in fields, in a boat, on the side of a hill, in houses – wherever he found himself. And

everywhere, people were astonished at the power and authority of his words.

The authority of Jesus' teaching is a recurrent theme in the Gospels. There was something about the way in which he taught that was different. Typically, teaching of the time drew attention to previous teachers and "authorities", piling up references and quotations, or rabbinic teaching, which dissected the Torah in forensic detail through question and answer. Jesus both asked and answered questions, and he did provoke debate. But he did not teach in this kind of detailed manner, nor did he bother much about precedent, or even scriptural authority. His teaching seems to claim a power and authority of its own.

In one way, though, Jesus' teaching echoes that of the rabbis: he expects people to copy him. During John's account of the Last Supper, Jesus strips and washes the disciples' feet as a demonstration of how they should serve one another. He says: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14–15).

A lot of Jesus' teaching involves provocative statements, or questions. He encourages questions. He uses clever forms of speech: metaphors, analogies, stories. He uses paradox: "...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it"; "Whoever wants to be first must be last" (Mark 8:35; 9:35).

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

He uses humour and exaggerates people nicknames which sum up. Most of all he fills his teaching with everyday life. And many of these in Jesus' most characteristic form were the sharp, disturbing, disorienting parables.

"With many such parables he spoke to them, as they were able to understand. He did not speak to them except in parables. He explained everything in parables to his disciples." (Mark 4:33–34)

There are some forty parables in the Gospels. The difficulty in being precise is because it's hard to define what is a parable. Some are little more than one-line sayings; others are longer, more complex narratives designed to be memorable as hardly anyone could read. Everything was heard and remembered.

These were not fairy stories or legends. They were stories intended to make the kingdom of God real, to ground the kingdom of God in the world of the listeners. They were intended to engage the audience – and at times to enrage them. Sometimes they were simple and clear, sometimes baffling and provocative. But they were always powerful.

Jesus was not unique in telling parables. The rabbis did the same. But Jesus' parables were unique in the way they were told.

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He uses humour and exaggeration. He gives
people nicknames which sum up their characteristics.
Most of all he fills his teaching with examples from
everyday life. And many of these examples turn up
in Jesus' most characteristic form of teaching, which
were the sharp, disturbing, disruptive stories that we
call parables.

**"With many such parables he spoke the word
to them, as they were able to hear it; he did
not speak to them except in parables, but
he explained everything in private to his
disciples." (Mark 4:33-34)**

There are some forty parables in the Gospels (the
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Sometimes they were simple and clear, at other times
baffling and provocative. But they all made people think.

Jesus was not unique in telling parables: other
rabbis did the same. But Jesus' parables were earthier.

God appears in many guises: landowner, father, obstinate judge; whereas in rabbinic parables God is nearly always a royal figure.

Indeed, that's what parables are: they are stories about the kingdom of God. They are not direct comparisons or allegories. The king in the story of the talents might represent God, but that doesn't mean that God necessarily behaves like the king in that story. Everything depends on the point that Jesus is trying to make.

MAJOR PARABLES OF JESUS

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Sower	13:1–9, 18–23	4:1–9, 13–20	8:4–8, 11–15
The Weeds	13:24–30, 36–43	4:26–29	
The Mustard Seed	13:31–32	4:30–32	13:18–19
The Yeast	13:33		13:20–21
The Hidden Treasure	13:44		
The Valuable Pearl	13:45–46		

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

Parable	Matthew
The Net	13:47–50
The Lost Sheep	18:10–14
The Unforgiving Servant	18:23–35
The Two Sons	21:28–32
The Tenants	21:33–44
The Wedding Feast	22:1–14
The Ten Bridesmaids	25:1–13
The Talents	25:14–30
The Good Samaritan	
The Rich Fool	
The Barren Fig Tree	
The Wedding Feast	
The Lost Coin	
The Prodigal Son	

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PARABLES OF JESUS

Matthew	Mark	Luke
13:1-9, 18-23	4:1-9, 13-20	8:4-8, 11-15
13:24-30, 36-43	4:26-29	
13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
13:33		13:20-21
13:44		
13:45-46		

STORY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

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Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Net	13:47-50		
The Lost Sheep	18:10-14		15:3-7
The Unforgiving Servant	18:23-35		
The Two Sons	21:28-32		
The Tenants	21:33-44	12:1-11	20:9-18
The Wedding Feast	22:1-14		14:16-24
The Ten Bridesmaids	25:1-13		
The Talents	25:14-30		19:11-27
The Good Samaritan			10:29-37
The Rich Fool			12:16-21
The Barren Fig Tree			13:6-9
The Wedding Feast			14:7-11
The Lost Coin			15:8-10
The Prodigal Son			15:11-32

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Dishonest Manager			16:1-9
The Rich Man and Lazarus			16:19-31
The Persistent Widow			18:1-8
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector			18:9-14

"He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." (Mark 1:27)

Back to that Sabbath in Capernaum. In the synagogue is a man possessed by a spirit. His presence is a surprise: from a Jewish point of view, demons defiled a person, which is why this man is described as having an "unclean spirit". Such people were ostracized and certainly not admitted to the synagogue. Nevertheless, there he is: perhaps he is an intruder, an interloper. Whatever the case, the spirit in him cries out against Jesus. Jesus replies: "Be silent, and come out of him!" The unclean spirit leaves the man, throwing him into convulsions "and crying with a loud voice" (Mark 1:25-26).

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

Our modern world finds the Gospels baffling and even abhorrent. And, indeed, in the West, something horrible about the Gospels is sometimes very evident. For instance, the account of Jesus curing a man of a spirit that was harming (Mark 9:22), or of Jesus curing a man of violent behaviour would be considered psychotic behaviour. At other times, the supernatural, such as the man with the many demons that inhabited him (Mark 5:1-20). Demon possession was seen as others as inherently evil: the power of something that was not there.

Ancient cultures took it for granted that demons could inhabit people, and there were many ways: through spells, charms, amulets, remedies, special rings, and so on. These were common, and pagan "services" through charms and amulets differed in a number of ways.

First, he performed the exorcism. No charms. No incantations. He commanded the demon to shut up and leave. The method often used is *ekballo*, from the Greek *ekballo*, which literally means to chuck them out.

Secondly, he restored people to health. Exorcisms were acts of liberation. What a demon was to be unclear. It was seen as a force that had to be driven out to the margins, living outside the community.

new	Mark	Luke
		16:1–9
		16:19–31
		18:1–8
		18:9–14

the unclean spirits, and
1:27)

pernament. In the synagogue spirit. His presence is a ment of view, demons defiled a man is described as having people were ostracized and e synagogue. Nevertheless, an intruder, an interloper. it in him cries out against ant, and come out of him!" e man, throwing him g with a loud voice"

Our modern world finds demon possession baffling and even abhorrent. It is the stuff of horror movies. And, indeed, in the Gospels there is something horrible about it. What is portrayed in the Gospels is sometimes very close to mental illness: for instance, the account of the boy repeatedly self-harming (Mark 9:22), or people chained because of violent behaviour would fit with certain diagnoses of psychotic behaviour. At other times it is more clearly supernatural, such as the casting out of Legion – the many demons that inhabited the man in Gerasa (Mark 5:1–20). Demon possessed people were not viewed by others as inherently evil: they were innocent victims, in the power of something that they could not control.

Ancient cultures took it for granted that evil powers could inhabit people, and they tried to combat this in many ways: through spells, incantations, herbal remedies, special rings, and amulets. Jewish exorcists were common, and pagan magicians offered similar "services" through charms and amulets. But Jesus differed in a number of ways.

First, he performed these deeds in his own power. No charms. No incantations. No amulets. He just told the demon to shut up and get out. The Greek word often used is *ekballo*, from *ballo* – to throw. Jesus literally chucked them out.

Secondly, he restored people to wholeness. Jesus' exorcisms were acts of liberation and release. To have a demon was to be unclean. These people were exiled to the margins, living outside the towns or even in

graveyards. So, in casting out their demon, Jesus brought them back into their community. Released from this terrible powerless slavery, they were now free to live their lives as they wished, and to rejoin their community.

Thirdly, Jesus explicitly linked the exorcism with the arrival of the kingdom. For Jesus, defeating these powers was a sign of the kingdom of God: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20).

The casting out of demons was a crucial part of Jesus' ministry, and exorcisms make up the single biggest category of healing in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Even his enemies acknowledged Jesus performed such miracles, although they claimed that he did it because he was in league with the devil.

We are not comfortable in our rational, scientific age with the idea of miracles, but the Gospel stories about Jesus give us no choice. There are too many stories for them all to be invented, and they are woven too closely into the account of his life. Jesus – the historical Jesus – performed miracles. That is why he was remembered. It has been popular, in certain circles, to "de-mythologize" Jesus, to remove the miraculous with the hope that it will leave us the historical Jesus. What it actually leaves us with is the forgettable Jesus. Without the miraculous there is no reason why Jesus should have been remembered by his followers.

Certainly the miraculous exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue makes Jesus famous. News starts to spread throughout Galilee. But he wasn't

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

doing it for effect. It was done

And as a result the man is mad

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"And all in the crowd were
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From the synagogue meeting

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doing it for effect. It was done to help a man in need. And as a result the man is made whole, restored, not just to his full faculties, but to the whole community.

"And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them." (Luke 6:19)

This is followed by another, different kind of healing. From the synagogue meeting, Jesus goes to Simon's house where he heals Simon's mother-in-law, sick with a fever.

So, after the first exorcism comes the first physical healing. And this act brings the crowds flocking to Jesus' door. Mark tells us that at sundown – which marks the beginning of the day after the Sabbath – people bring their sick and possessed to Jesus for healing and exorcism (Mark 1:32–34).

Like the exorcisms, the healing miracles are acts of restoration. There is more to them than simply "making someone well". The lame, the blind, the deaf were reduced to begging: that was the only work they could do. So when Jesus healed them it was like a whole new life: he restored their dignity and their capacity to earn and to support themselves and a family.

Jesus healed those who were excluded. The classic examples of this were people with leprosy. This is not what the modern world calls leprosy – which is Hansen's disease – it covers a range of skin diseases, skin rashes, blemishes or other kinds of disfigurements. While not fatal, these diseases were

seen as rendering the sufferer impure. Even being under the same roof as a leper made you impure; lying or eating within the house would necessitate a complete change of clothes (Leviticus 14:33–47).

Lepers were therefore kept in a state of near-permanent quarantine and excluded from towns and communities. The lepers Jesus encounters on the edge of a village in Samaria shout at him from a distance (Luke 17:12). These people were barred from the Temple: the place most connected with the earthly presence of God. Recovered lepers could enter, but even then there was a special place in the Temple – the House of Lepers – where they would have to undergo various purification rituals. It didn't mean that God did not care for them. But it did mean that they could never fully engage with the worshipping community. Jesus changed all that.

Jesus is recorded as touching lepers *before* they were cured (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13). This touch makes Jesus himself impure, but it doesn't seem to worry him. So when Jesus heals a leper he is doing more than ridding someone of a skin disease. He is making the impure, pure. The exiled, the forgotten, the "dead" are brought back to life.

The healings are acts of restoration. But they are also, sometimes, acts of deliberate provocation. Strictly speaking, healing was one of the thirty-nine categories of prohibited work in the rabbinical teachings on the Sabbath. Jesus was always getting into trouble for breaking the Sabbath rules in one

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

way or another, or for contravening and purity rules. On the Sabbath he did serious, but not fatal, conditions. enough, permitted to heal or rescue a life-threatening condition on the Sabbath. conditions could wait until the next day. true of his disciples who plucked grain and walked through a field on the Sabbath. starving to death, they could have a right of plucking grain, but they didn't. Jesus' was a plea to put things into proper perspective. Sabbath was a gift to people, not a punishment to imprison them (Matthew 12:1–8).

The healings, then, say something about Jesus is and the authority that he has. proclamations of the arrival of the Kingdom and the messianic status of Jesus. Finally, Jesus sends disciples to find out whether John thought he was. Jesus replies, "whatever you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleaned, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel brought to them" (Matthew 11:2–5).

JOHN'S SIGNS

In John's Gospel, Jesus performs many miracles. John calls "signs". These are miracles that identify who Jesus really is. The miracles that Jesus explicitly identifies as signs are:

the sufferer impure. Even being as a leper made you impure; in the house would necessitate a change of clothes (Leviticus 14:33–47). Before kept in a state of near-exile and excluded from towns and villages. Jesus encounters on the edge of a city shouting at him from a distance. People were barred from the most connected with the earthly recovered lepers could enter, but a special place in the Temple – where they would have to purification rituals. It didn't mean anything for them. But it did mean that they could engage with the worshipping community and change all that. As touching lepers before they were healed (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13). This was itself impure, but it doesn't seem that when Jesus heals a leper he is doing someone of a skin disease. He is making them pure. The exiled, the forgotten, the back to life.

acts of restoration. But they are acts of deliberate provocation. Healing was one of the thirty-nine permitted work in the rabbinical Sabbath. Jesus was always getting into trouble for breaking the Sabbath rules in one

way or another, or for contravening Jewish food laws and purity rules. On the Sabbath he healed people of serious, but not fatal, conditions. It was, reasonably enough, permitted to heal or rescue someone in a life-threatening condition on the Sabbath, but lesser conditions could wait until the next day. The same is true of his disciples who plucked grain to eat as they walked through a field on the Sabbath. They were not starving to death, they could have avoided the "work" of plucking grain, but they didn't. Jesus' response was a plea to put things into proper perspective. The Sabbath was a gift to people, not a cage in which to imprison them (Matthew 12:1–8).

The healings, then, say something about who Jesus is and the authority that he has. They were proclamations of the arrival of the kingdom of God and the messianic status of Jesus. From prison, John sends disciples to find out whether Jesus really is who John thought he was. Jesus replies, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:2–5).

JOHN'S SIGNS

In John's Gospel, Jesus performs a series of what John calls "signs". These are miracles which show who Jesus really is. The miracles which John explicitly identifies as signs are:

- Changing water into wine in Cana (John 2:1–11)
- Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum (John 4:46–54)
- Healing the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1–18)
- Feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5–14)
- Healing the blind man (John 9:1–7)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–45)

Some add Jesus walking on water (John 6:16–24) to this list, but John doesn't call it a sign.

John sees all these as signs which point to Jesus' true nature and purpose. All of them are to do with abundant life.

Jesus performed these miracles first and foremost because he felt compassion. He was genuinely upset by the suffering he encountered. When he sees the harassed, exhausted crowd, when he meets a leper excluded from society, when he is greeted by blind men, when he goes to Nain and meets a widow who has lost her only son, when he drives out the demon at the foot of the mountain, the Gospels use the rather wonderful Greek word *splanchnizomai*. This is translated as "to have pity" or "feel sympathy", but the root of the word comes from *splanchnon* which meant the inward parts – the guts of an animal or human. Jesus is gutted. He is stomach-wrenchingly moved.

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

He feels this especially in Bethany to find his friend Lazarus has died. He weeps. Why? It's not because of Lazarus from the dead. He's weeping and the grief are just so wrong. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb.

Along with the healings and the other miracles which are hard to believe, Jesus feeds thousands of people with just a few loaves and some fish. He walks on water. The important thing about these miracles is their extent. Raising someone from the dead is more impressive than healing a blind man. These are extraordinary, unexpected acts. The important thing about these miracles, again, point to who Jesus is. "You walk on the sea, your path, through the mountains", says the psalmist (Psalm 77:19). In the Gospels, Jesus is the God who walked on water. In the Gospels, Jesus is the God who brings resurrection of the dead. Jesus is doing it.

You don't think...

"And after he had dismissed the crowd, he went up the mountain by himself." (Matthew 14:23)

After the events in Capernaum, when it was still very early in the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35). Throughout his ministry,

to wine in Cana (John 2:1–11)
official's son in Capernaum

at Bethesda (John 5:1–18)
(John 6:5–14)

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He feels this especially in Bethany, when he arrives to find his friend Lazarus has died. Jesus is so upset, he weeps. Why? It's not because of loss – he raises Lazarus from the dead. He's weeping because the pain and the grief are just so wrong. He feels it deeply. And he calls Lazarus out of the tomb.

Along with the healings and the exorcisms, there are other miracles which are hard to quantify. Jesus feeds thousands of people with just a few loaves and some fish. He walks on water. He calms a storm. The important thing about these miracles is not their extent. Raising someone from the dead seems more impressive than healing a blind man, but both are extraordinary, unexpected acts of power. The important thing about these miracles is that they, once again, point to who Jesus is. “Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters,” wrote the psalmist (Psalm 77:19). In the Old Testament it was God who walked on water. In the Old Testament it is God who brings resurrection of the dead. And now Jesus is doing it.

You don't think...

“And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.”
(Matthew 14:23)

After the events in Capernaum, we are told that “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Throughout his mission, the pressure was

on Jesus. He was faced with unremitting pressure from the authorities – who opposed what he was doing; from people who brought him endless questions; and from people who were always wanting to be healed. In such circumstances Jesus' personal practice was to seek what solitude he could. At key moments in his life he retreated, escaping into the wilderness.

Everything that Jesus did was fuelled by his relationship with God and, in particular, with his deep, radical, and persistent prayer. Jesus spoke a lot about prayer. He told stories which showed the need to persist, and to pray with faith and belief. "I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed," he said, "you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

And the most startling aspect of his prayer life was that it portrayed a closer, much more personal God. The Jews did not use the name of God: they substituted it with other words, such as "the Lord". But when Jesus talked about God, he used the Aramaic word *abba* – the deeply personal, Aramaic name for father.

We should not think necessarily of modern fathers. The father in the ancient world was an authoritarian figure who had control over his family. So this is not some completely indulgent father, but neither is it a father to be scared of. Instead it is someone who combines both love and authority.

This is a unique aspect of Jesus' teaching. In hardly any other sources from this period is God addressed

3. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING

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If God was their father, then his family. At one point, Jesus' arrived to take him home – they of control. He rejected them, to crowd and saying, "Here are my brothers! Whoever does the will and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31). shockingly radical statement in where your kin, your family, was. followers went on to adopt this. They talked of each other as brothers. He was the elder brother; they were

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In this way. The Aramaic word *abba* became so important to the early church that they adopted it, even though they all spoke Greek. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer preserves the Aramaic feel of the original: "When you pray, say: Father..." (Luke 11:2).

If God was their father, then they were all part of his family. At one point, Jesus' mother and brothers arrived to take him home – they thought he was out of control. He rejected them, looking around at the crowd and saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34–35). This was a shockingly radical statement in the first-century world, where your kin, your family, was everything. But Jesus' followers went on to adopt this vocabulary themselves. They talked of each other as brother and sister. Jesus was the elder brother; they were a new family.

Jesus goes out "throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons" (Mark 1:39). Matthew's version has Jesus "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Matthew 4:23). This, then, was the message: healing, casting out demons, and telling people the good news of the kingdom.