

The year is \_\_\_\_\_. It was once decided that we should measure the passage of time by counting the years since the birth of a child named **Jesus** in the small town of Bethlehem, a little south of the city of Jerusalem. He was born into the **Jewish** people: what was left of the ancient nation of **Israel**, the "**Hebrews**." Their identity as a people rested on **God**, the almighty creator of everything - "**the Lord**" - having chosen them from among all the nations as a people of His very own. He promised them a land of plenty, and freed them from slavery in Egypt to obtain it. The **Israelites** understood God to be **holy**: separate from this world, unpolluted by its evils. He wanted His people, Israel, to be holy also.

The Israelites eventually became the prosperous and successful Kingdom of Israel. But they experienced conquest and were scattered, and at the time of Jesus' birth, the Jewish people, and the land that God had promised Israel many centuries before, were ruled over by the mighty Roman Empire. In the sacred Hebrew writings, the **Scriptures**, there were **prophecies** of a "**Messiah**" - the "anointed one" of God, or, in Greek, the "**Christ**" - who would rescue Israel, restore its kingdom, and lead all the peoples of the world to the Lord. He would be "Emmanuel": God among us.

The Scriptures were the record of Israel's history and its relationship with God through **covenants**: family-like bonds based on sworn promises. God made clear to Israel that He despised "**sin**": the many ways in which we, His human creation, "miss the mark" by turning from God and towards evil. God gave Israel "**the Law**" to keep His people holy, pure, and righteous. "**Prophets**" spoke on God's behalf to draw Israel back to Him whenever it strayed from the path of righteousness. They foretold of a **new covenant** in which God would deliver His people from sin.

It was recorded by men who knew Jesus - whose name means "God saves" in Hebrew - that His mother, **Mary**, though a virgin, became pregnant through an act of the **Holy Spirit**: that is, God Himself. Mary and her spouse, Joseph, raised Jesus in the Jewish religion. When He had reached about the age of 30, He began proclaiming to His people the "**good news**," or "**gospel**," of the **kingdom of God**. Jesus called and instructed a group of twelve **Apostles**, granting the highest responsibility among these men to Simon, who He renamed "**Peter**." He taught a group of **disciples**, performed miraculous "signs" witnessed by many, healed the sick, befriended sinners who were otherwise shunned, freed people from possession by evil spirits, and even revived the dead.

In doing all this, Jesus showed Himself to be the Messiah, the Christ. He was, truly, the **Son of God**, calling God "my Father"; He invited us also to say, with Him, "**our Father**." He talked of being one with God His Father, enraging some, enthraling others. He revealed an incredible yet puzzling truth about God, which took generations to even slightly fathom out: **the one God is three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**, or the **Trinity**. Jesus is the Son of God, and **Jesus is God**. He showed the love of the Father for His Son, and the love of God for the whole world and everyone in it, giving a face to the invisible God of Israel.

Angering the leaders of His own people with His words and deeds, Jesus was betrayed by one of His own Apostles. He died hanging on a wooden cross at the hands of the Romans: the awful

punishment known as **crucifixion**. His body lay in a tomb the following day; on the third day, as He had said would happen, He **rose from the dead**. He was different now in this glorified state. His body carried the wounds of His ordeal, but it was supernaturally alive. He would appear suddenly, unconstrained by distance or walls, and could only be recognized for who He truly was when someone truly believed it was Him.

For forty days after His **resurrection** He appeared to His followers and spoke of the kingdom of God. After this time, he "ascended" to **Heaven**, entering physically the presence and intimacy of God the Father and His hosts of spiritual beings - **angels** - beyond this visible world. Before doing so, Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit - the "advocate" or "helper" - would come in His wake. The Spirit came upon the Apostles, empowering them to proclaim the same gospel they had heard from Jesus.

What, then, was Jesus' "good news"? It was a joyous message of **salvation from sin** through the everlasting kingdom He has established among us through His life, death, and resurrection. This is the **grace** of God: a generous and unmerited free gift to the world. For God so loved the world, that He gave us His only Son, that whoever believes in Him - places their trust in Him, loves Him, follows Him, does the will of God - may have **eternal life**. Through Jesus, one may live in hope that one's **soul** - the spiritual and immortal aspect of one's humanity - may dwell after death in union with God in Heaven.

Jesus, both truly human and truly God, rose from the dead. Through His resurrection, we too gain the hope of a resurrection of our own at the end of time, when Jesus will stand in judgement over us all. He is the very image of the God who created us, and who alone can rightfully judge, and therefore punish, our sin. Thus, His **mercy** towards us - His reaching out to us to **save** us - is all the more glorious. God sent His son not to bring judgement upon us during our lifetimes, but to rescue us from our sins. He is the "**light of the world**." He is the "**Good Shepherd**" calling us, seeking us, rescuing us, protecting us, leading us.

The kingdom Jesus has proclaimed is of God and Heaven, not of this world, and not of that wicked and most rebellious of God's "fallen angels" whom Jesus called "the Evil One," "the Enemy," "the father of lies," "the prince of this world," "**the Devil**," "**Satan**." It is a kingdom at war not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the Devil's deceit and the spirits under his rule who influence this world. The kingdom is God the Father rescuing us from this dominion of **darkness**, and making us worthy to be part of a kingdom of **light**. It is the power of God's Spirit, and the rejection and defeat of evil spirits who wish us harm: **demons**.

It is a kingdom that belongs especially to the sick, the poor, the spiritually needy, the sinner. Its king was born in humble circumstances; and died as a criminal, alongside criminals, His crown made by His executioners not out of gold, but ugly, piercing thorns. It is a kingdom that God has intended to include both the righteous and the sinner, as a field may contain weeds among the crops, or a fishing net both bad fish and good. The lives of the righteous and the sinner are intertwined, and the day will come when God separates them.

It is a kingdom established not through violent acts, swift public victories, and the passing of laws, but through unseen sprouting and slow-and-steady growth, as a seed becomes a tree. It is a kingdom that emerges through a gradual spreading within persons and within the world, as yeast must be kneaded throughout the whole dough. As a farmer labours to prepare a field and sow seeds yet relies for their growth on things beyond his control, so it is with God's kingdom: while He makes use of our efforts, it will grow only according to His design, not ours.

It is a kingdom of more value than anything in this world. It is a buried treasure, a fine pearl, for which we are called to give up all else. It is a kingdom of **righteousness, peace, and joy** open to all people who turn their minds from sin and live faithfully for God with the trust, humility, sincerity, simplicity, and dependence of a child; who would abandon their attachment to riches and worldly pleasures and concerns, and endure suffering and persecution for the kingdom. And we live faithfully according to God in this way, recognizing Jesus as Lord through the gift that is the Spirit of God.

This Spirit aids us in **prayer**: that is, when we seek God in our heart - our innermost self - and we speak to Him, listen for Him, open ourselves to Him, allow ourselves to be shaped by Him. Jesus told His disciples to **pray** these words: "Our Father in Heaven ... Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." That kingdom is the presence, through Christ, of the holiness, love, justice, and mercy of God in this world. When we pray, it is our yearning for this presence, for the sake of ourselves and for others, and the Spirit of God yearns with us.

Jesus has promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to us through **baptism**: a washing with water "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." To be baptized is to be born anew, and to be made new, the water and the words being a sign of the Spirit at work. Receiving the Spirit of God and being led by it ensures that truly we are adopted **children of God**, who like Jesus will inherit the kingdom He has merited from His Father. The Spirit of God dwelling within us, the laws of God resting in our hearts and in our minds, and **redemption, the forgiveness** of our sins: these are the promises of the **new and everlasting covenant** Jesus has made for us by offering His life to the Father. Through these promises, we take part in God's own divine nature, and escape this world's darkness and corruption.

Jesus wished to make His **sacrifice** present to us forevermore. The night before He died, He shared with His Apostles their final **Passover**: the annual feast marking God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Jesus shared bread with His Apostles; He broke it and said, "Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body, which will be given up for you." He also took wine and said "Drink this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant. It will be shed for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins." He asked that these things be done in renewal of this covenant.

Jesus had once shocked His followers by saying that to have eternal life and to participate in the resurrection, they would need to eat His flesh and drink His blood. He was referring, however, to this Passover meal. After His resurrection, some of His own disciples recognized Him only when He "broke bread" with them. As the Apostles brought people to faith in Jesus, they celebrated with them this ritual, just as He had commanded, and did so every "Lord's Day," that is, **Sunday**: the day of His resurrection, and the

day after the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day. Through sharing in Jesus' body and blood in this act of thanksgiving, or "**Eucharist**," we ourselves become part of the **Body of Christ**.

Why did Jesus give us this unbloody *sacrifice* for worshipping God together? In choosing Israel, God had sought to purify them from sin and from the worship of "idols": man-made figures of wood or metal through which demons would corrupt and control. Israel was surrounded by nations devoted to these gods, to whom priests offered sacrifices of food, drink, animals, and people: even children. To draw Israel away from idolatry, God commanded that they have their own priesthood offering sacrifices of bread, wine, crops, and animals, first in the Tabernacle (tent) in the desert, later in the Temple in Jerusalem. These were sacrifices of thanksgiving to God, sacrifices to atone for individual and community sin, sacrifices to reconcile God and His people. This constant offering up of food and spilling of blood could not truly deal with sin, of course. In offering Himself on the Cross, Jesus took on the role of both "high priest" and sacrificial "**lamb of God**." Many people sacrificed food to idols and ate it hoping to commune with these false gods. But Jesus gave us a sacrifice through which to commune with Him, and to communicate His life to us, through consuming His own sacrificed flesh and blood. It would still take place in a "temple," not built from stone, but rather from those in whom dwelt the Spirit of God: "**Christians**" gathered together as a "**church**." And the Apostles were the first of a new **priesthood** of Jesus Christ, offering this mysterious sacrifice as He commanded.

The good news of Jesus Christ has come to us through the Apostles and those to whom they first handed it on. Jesus established His universal "**Church**" - His assembly of believers united in His Body - as the "pillar of truth." In the Apostles He gave it hierarchy and leadership. Through the Spirit, He gave them the **authority** to teach, and even to forgive sins, in His name. And the Apostles passed this authority down to others they chose. It was this Church, with this authority, that told the world where to find the **Word of God** spoken and recorded: in the collection of Jewish Scriptures and early Christian writings: the "**Old Testament**" and the "**New Testament**," together known as the **Bible**. Through the Bible, the teachings preserved from the Apostles and those "Church Fathers" who came after them, and the continuing guidance of their successors led by the Holy Spirit, we come to know God and to grow in holiness.

Seek out God's kingdom and covenant, and membership and participation in the Body of Christ. Seek these things in a Christian community where a *priest* of Christ, who has inherited the role and authority that Jesus Himself gave to the Apostles, offers the Lord's own Body and Blood, under the appearance of bread and wine, as a sacrifice to God. This priest will also hold the same authority to grant forgiveness as Jesus gave to the Apostles. This community should be part of a wider universal Church that traces itself in an unbroken chain through time back to Jesus, to the Apostles with Peter as their head chosen by Christ, and to those "Church Fathers" who learned from the Apostles and passed on the **Apostolic** faith to others.

And while seeking such a church, remember to *pray*.

*This One-Sheet Gospel came from \_\_\_\_\_*