

# Jesus' genealogy

a sermon given by the Very Rev Jim Mein at St Margaret's, Rosyth,  
and at Holy Trinity, Dunfermline, on Sunday, 19 January 2014

The readings were Isaiah 49.1-7; 1 Corinthians 1.1-9; Matthew 1.1-17

Well done, Gospel readers! Stick your hand up if you have heard that reading in Church before.

People these days seem interested in their genealogy so it seemed a good idea to look at Jesus'. Of course it is not accurate – or if it is then the one that Luke gives can't be as they are different in many respects – but actually I don't put great trust in either. More interesting is asking why Matthew gives us this list.

First, 14 generations Abraham to David, 14 generations David to the exile, 14 generations exile to Jesus.

14 is not a common Biblical number but it is twice 7, and 7 was the number that pointed to inclusivity – to all the nations of the world – as I pointed out only a fortnight ago when introducing the Epiphany theme of light coming to the whole world. In Luke's genealogy there are 42 generations back to David rather than 28, another 13 back to Abraham and 20 from there back to Adam.

If Matthew were drawing attention to Jesus' Jewishness I guess he may have listed 12 generations rather than 14. And this is interesting: Matthew is the Gospel written most clearly for Jews. I remember preaching many years ago, in Grangemouth I think, that it was significant Matthew started his genealogy from Abraham while Luke, the more Gentile directed Gospel, started from Adam. But actually I think now that Matthew chose Abraham, David and the Exile, not to stress Jewishness in Jesus, but to point to the universal nature of God's activity in this man.

Abraham, who was called from Ur of the Chaldees in the great Babylonian empire. David, who founded Jerusalem where all the nations would gather to worship the one God of all people, And the Exile, the time when the Jews really came to terms in an existential way with their God being the true God of all the nations, all places. Matthew is putting Jesus firmly in place as the Messiah, the light of the whole world, not only of the Jews.

But there is something else in these verses I also find rather interesting. There are four women mentioned, five if you count Mary. This is remarkable in itself: why mention women at all? Well, oddly, in Judaism, generally very patriarchal, it is through your mother that you inherit your nationality, your Jewishness. And that makes it more interesting to look at these particular four:

**Tamar**, a Canaanite women, mother of Judah's son, Perez, was not Judah's wife, she was his daughter-in-law. In Genesis Chapter 38 this is a complicated and rather nasty little story of law breaking, and the sin of Onan (I'll not tell what that was here), and deception, all leading to incest. Read Genesis 38.

Then **Rahab**, mother of Salmon's son, was a prostitute in Jericho. She sheltered the spies sent by Joshua and let them down the outer walls by rope to escape. For this she and her family were spared when the walls fell, all Jericho was destroyed but she came to live amongst the Jews. That story is in Joshua 2.

Then there is **Ruth**, the Moabitess, the mother of Boaz's son, Obed, grandmother of David. She had come to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi and one night, after making sure Boaz had enjoyed a good strong drink at the end of harvest, she crawled under his blankets and begged to be taken as his wife. Ruth's story has a whole book.

And finally **Bathsheeba** (Matthew simply calls her the wife of Uriah) who was the mother of David's son, Solomon. A very nasty story of lust, adultery and murder in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

I suspect most people searching for their ancestors are pleased if they find a famous inventor or artist a few generations back, and are disappointed if there are only criminals or vagabonds – but we are not too worried, after all we know we are all just human. But it is interesting that Matthew goes out of his way (by mentioning these four women, three of them immigrants) to show that Jesus came from a racially mixed line that included incest, prostitution, seduction and adultery. Jesus came indeed from a line very much like ours!

I've talked about this, partly because I admit I find it interesting and it is not preached about very often in the Christmas services I attend – so I thought you may be interested too. But also for a more serious reason: I think the birth stories in Matthew and Luke are significant – not because they are historically true – I'm quite clear myself that it is very difficult if not impossible to hold together the Luke and Matthew birth stories – they seem to have been written later and be unknown to Paul and Mark who wrote earlier. No, they are significant BECAUSE they were invented – created to put in story form the truths people needed to express about this man Jesus. They are inspired myths – that is, stories which describe a deep truth.

So, when he is presenting a story of God and humanity coming together, Matthew does not choose an important, royal family, or even an image of good noble savage; rather we are given this genealogy that involves the outcast, the sinners, the people who in the Jewish laws of the time deserved to be stoned, beheaded, executed. It is very different, I believe, from the later Church ideas about Mary being immaculately conceived so that she had no original sin to pass on to Jesus. The Jesus of the Gospels is human, not half human.

This seems an important point in the Week of Prayer for Unity – we should not expect other Churches to be perfect for God to speak through them. One thing we could learn is that God can, and does, use most unpromising material to work through – this is a common theme through the Bible, God often uses the youngest, poorest, weakest, least promising and so on. Victims of incest, prostitution, seduction and adultery – and, even more amazing, three of the four women were foreign, Gentiles. There was no racial purity in this, the most Jewish of all four Gospels.

So I want to end by suggesting two thoughts:

*First*, it's dangerous to dismiss anyone as being unimportant, insignificant – an old lady confined to bed, that lad sitting out in the carpark. It may well be that something they have done, or something they will do, is really important to God's plan in our evolving world.

And *second*, what has God called you to do? What is your role in life? Because there is one – or rather there are lots – all the little things you do every day are significant. But what might you be remembered for.

Hopefully not for being the victim of incest, or a prostitute, or creeping under the bosses' blanket, or adultery, but rather for leaving some mark on the future. The mother of Judah's son Perez; the woman who saved the men in Jericho, the faithful daughter-in-law, the mother of Solomon

We all grow out of our heritage, some of it will have been helpful, some not, and future generations – not just our own bloodline but the influence we have been on many people – future generations will grow out of what we leave. It's a scary thought, very scary, but that whole mess is what God works through. We can help, or hinder, but God will keep working.