

Matthew 1:1-17

It is the tradition in many Church of England churches to stand for the Gospel reading. This morning I suggest that you sit down as the beginning of Matthew's Gospel is not the kind of story we hear every Sunday. This is the genealogy of Jesus. Here is a word that is rarely used, but what does it mean? I had to look it up.

Genealogy is the study of family history and ancestry, involving tracing lineage and building family trees by researching historical records (births, marriages, deaths), oral traditions, and even DNA, to understand how people are related across generations, revealing origins, relationships and ancestral stories. It's the science of charting descent, often displayed visually as branching trees, and can apply to humans, animals, or even species, exploring shared ancestry and evolution.

So, I will read out a long list of names about that are the forefathers of Jesus. So let's see how many of these names you have heard? How many do you know? Fourteen generations, did anybody get over 8?

The point of this long list is, of course, that tracing family trees is seen by many societies as very important. My eldest brother has spent an enormous amount of time on trying to find out as much as he could of our family history. He managed to go back to the Robinson and the McGregor families only as far as 150 years ago. I could find out a much older list of McGregors, but they would be the leaders of the clan. It is not only in Europe in that tribes and families can describe their ancestry, other countries do the same. This should remind us of what is going on at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel.

The average modern person who thinks "maybe I'll read the New Testament is puzzled to find, on the very first page, a long list of names he or she has never heard of. But it is important not to think that this is a waste of time. For many cultures ancient and modern and especially in the Jewish world of Matthew's day, this genealogy was the equivalent of a roll of drums, a fanfare of trumpets, and a town crier calling for attention. Any first-century Jew would find his family tree both impressive and compelling. Like a great parade coming down a city street, we watch the figures at the front and the ones in the middle, but all the eyes are waiting for the one who comes in the position of the greatest honour, right at the end. I don't know about you, but most of the names that were mentioned this morning were unknown to me. I could only be sure of 11 out of 42 (= 3x14). Most of these were the names from the worst and longest times suffered by those whose names we have heard of. These were the people who lived during and after the exile in Babylon. On their return to Jerusalem, they were able to rebuild the temple, but for much of the time after their return they had no functioning monarchy. The kings and queens they had in the 200 years before the birth of Jesus had no royal blood and were not even fully Jewish.

The most famous member of this family was Herod. Matthew doesn't mention him, he didn't want spies to overhear anyone saying Jesus was part of the true royal family. But that's what Matthew does on Jesus' behalf. And as though to make clear that Jesus was just one member of a set of 14 names - or perhaps we should say, six groups of seven names. The number 7 was and is one of the most powerful symbolic numbers, and to be born at the beginning of the whole list. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what Israel had been waiting for

for two thousand years. If God can work through these bizarre ways, he seems to be saying, watch what will happen now.

But Matthew also knows that the way it happened is very strange. He is about to tell how Mary, Jesus' mother, became pregnant, not from her fiancé Joseph but through the Holy Spirit. So, Matthew adds to his list reminders of the strange ways God worked. By far the most amazing thing is the number of women in his list of unusual people who played an important role in this story. They had no legal rights, they were regarded not as persons but as things. They were merely the possession of their father or husband and in his disposal to do as he liked. In the regular form of the morning prayers, the Jewish men thanked God that they had not been made a Gentile, a slave or a woman. The very existence of these names in any pedigree at all is appalling.

But when we look at who these women were, and at what they did, the matter becomes even more amazing. Rahab was a harlot of Jericho, Ruth was not even a Jewess, she was a Moabite and they were a hated people. There were two others who were also regarded as nonentities. The barriers between male and female are down. In so many countries - and sadly near to people around us - this is not the case. The old contempt has not gone, but men and women are equally dear to God and equally important to his services.

The good news is - in Christ there is no barrier between saint and sinner. Somehow God can use for his purposes and fit into his scheme of things those who have sinned greatly. "I came," said Jesus, "not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

So that is how Matthew's Gospel begins, which has stood at the front of the New Testament since very early times. Millions of Christians have read the beginning of this gospel. It was the beginning of their own exploitation of who Jesus was and is. Once we understand what it all means, we are ready to proceed with the story. What Matthew is saying is both the fulfilment of two millennia of God's promises and purposes, and something quite new and different. God still works like that today; keeping his promises for those who learn to trust him.

In just four days, we have yet another day when there will be "joy to the world". We will be celebrating that here and on Sunday 28 December.