

Matthew 1

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Date: 10 December 2006

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[0 : 00] Given that we read chapter 1 of Matthew's Gospel, and given the time of year this is, you would be forgiven for expecting that this morning's sermon would be a sermon on the Nativity.

But actually what I want to look at is the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. Now that might be a surprising choice, because I suspect most of us, if we do anything with the genealogy, we read it through rather hastily, in order that we can get to verse 18 of chapter 1 and the story of the birth of Jesus.

More likely, I suspect most of us effectively begin the New Testament with Matthew chapter 1 verse 18, that we glance at the opening page of Matthew's Gospel and simply jump past the genealogy, because in our minds, well, all it is is a list of names.

What value is there in a list of names? And in a sense, I think that's something of a shame, because the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel is essentially the gateway into his Gospel.

It's in a sense the foyer that we first enter when we enter Matthew's story. And as we stand in that foyer, we are given glimpses of what we can expect to come in the rest of the Gospel.

[1 : 26] Because Matthew does some surprising things in this genealogy. He, first of all, arranges his material into groups of 14 generations, and that's a surprising thing to do with a genealogy.

Secondly, he also makes mention of specific key points in the genealogy of brothers. And thirdly, he makes mention of points in this genealogy of women.

And within the context of genealogies in the ancient world, these are surprising things to do, because typically a genealogy simply lists that so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, that so-and-so was the parent of this person.

And there's seldom mention of brothers, there's seldom mention of women. The fact that Matthew does this is a surprising feature. It calls attention to itself, and begs us to reflect upon why Matthew mentions the brothers, why Matthew mentions the women, and why Matthew arranges his material into groups of 14 generations.

And hopefully we'll see as we work through it. It's because each of these points is invested with theological significance, that Matthew perceives a theological significance in these elements, and wants his readers to ponder that and consider that.

[3 : 02] And I think, in a sense, that's the explanation for why Matthew's genealogy differs from that of Luke. People have often picked up on the fact that, as Matthew lists the forebears of Jesus, Jesus' lineage, he lists, at certain points, different people to those who are listed by Luke.

And lots of ink has been spilled on why that's the case, and it's often been argued that that's one of the streams of evidence for why we can't take the Gospels as reliable historical information.

Well, the fact is that genealogies in the ancient world were always rather selective in the particular individuals that they mention in someone's lineage. And the difference seems to be that, as Luke selects those who are in Jesus' lineage and recounts them, his agenda and his concern is to demonstrate Jesus' credentials to be the messianic claimant, the one on David's throne.

Whereas Matthew looks back at Jesus' lineage and sees a certain theological significance at various points in that lineage.

He sees, even in Jesus' genealogy, hints and shadows of the Gospel that would be revealed in its fullest form, finally, with the coming of Jesus.

[4 : 28] He sees the Gospel in its formative sake, even in Jesus' genealogy. So what I want to do this morning is to work through that genealogy and look simply at those three things I mentioned.

the grouping into 14 generations, the mention of brothers, and the mention of the women. And those will just be our titles. There are no funky titles this morning, just the mention of these various things.

But hopefully as we do work through them, we'll see a great deal that will be relevant to ourselves in terms of our understanding of the Gospel and in terms of our communication of the Gospel. Let me just say one more thing before we move on to these. And that is that the genealogy, obviously, is introduced with the words, a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

And as we look at these three elements that I've mentioned already, we'll see the importance of David and the importance of Abraham within those elements.

[5 : 35] And by way of introduction, let me just say that we should bear in mind that all that Matthew does with this genealogy plays off these figures of Abraham and David, but in quite significant ways.

Let's come to the material then. Let's work our way through this genealogy. The first thing I mentioned is that Matthew arranges this material into three groups of 14 generations.

If you have an NIV or a modern Bible in front of you, the material will probably be arranged in that way. But it's also something that Matthew calls explicit attention to in verse 17.

Thus, there were 14 generations in all, from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the exile to Babylon, and 14 from the exile to the Christ.

Now, I want to suggest two reasons why Matthew arranges his material into these groups of 14 generations. These are reasons that many people have seen in Matthew's arrangement and just passing them on.

[6 : 47] The first of those reasons, I think, is very much the case and is very obviously the case. The second, when we come to it, is perhaps more questionable, but I'll throw it out and you can respond to it as you will.

The first is that there's a sense that as Matthew looks back over Jesus' lineage and as he looks back over history, he sees a certain pattern emerging, a certain shape to history and to the lineage, that the key moments in the history of God's people and their dealings with God, the key moments in the genealogy of Jesus are separated according to a kind of regular pattern that between Abraham and David, between David in the exile, and now from the exile onwards, there is a pattern of 14 generations.

And as Matthew looks back over history, he sees that pattern emerging. The key thing is that he singles out the figures who are of apothal significance within God's dealing with his people.

As a Jew looking back over history, Matthew would probably see many points of truly huge significance in the history of the people. But perhaps no other moments would be as significant as the calling of Abraham and the instituting of God's covenant with Abraham, narrated back in the book of Genesis, the anointing of David to become the great king over Israel, and the exile to Babylon.

These would be, in a sense, the greatest, the pivot points around which the history of God's dealing with his people revolves.

[8 : 47] And as Matthew looks back over the history of God's dealings with his people, he sees a certain pattern, a certain symmetry of 14 generations. And as he thinks about the significance of Jesus, he sees Jesus as fitting within that pattern.

that Jesus' coming fits within the symmetry of God's dealings with his people. And it's a way of flagging up on Matthew's part his perception that Jesus is not simply a random person in the history of God's work.

He's not simply a person who just happens to have a certain significance. He's not just a person who happens to be important to a particular group of people. But he is a person who is part of God's unfolding plan of redemption.

He is a person who is on the same kind of epochal level of significance as Abraham, as David, as the exile. He is also a pivotal part of God's plan.

And so Matthew perceives Jesus very much to be part of God's plan of salvation, of God's unfolding plan of redemption for his people. And indeed, as we work into the gospel, we see that not only is Jesus as significant as Abraham, as David, as the events of the exile, but that Jesus is more significant.

[10 : 19] But whereas Abraham, the exile, David, were key stages in the history of God's dealing with his people, Jesus is the key stage of the history of God's dealing with his people.

And indeed, the point is that he sees Abraham and David as figures who essentially forran Jesus.

And that Jesus' story is not simply on a level with these, but is the culmination of the story that is rooted in Abraham and David.

And Matthew, looking back over history, sees that history is not just random accidents, that history is not just things that happen or happen to happen, but that history is something in which God works.

God works with purpose, God works with plan, and that purpose and plan have come to a culmination in Jesus. And the inference of that very point from the shape of the genealogy is that Jesus is not simply the culmination of prior history, but that Jesus is the very pivot point of history that all subsequent history looks back to.

[11 : 42] But as Matthew narrates this story about Jesus, he is saying, this is it. This is what everything was working up to. This is what the story of Abraham was all about.

This is what the story of David was all about. And this is what everything since must look back to as the key moment in history.

So Matthew perceives a shape to history that highlights and flags up the significance of Jesus within that history. Now I want to just think about that and think about what the application of that might be for a moment.

The first thing that I want to perhaps flag up, there may be many applications that you can make of that, but the first thing I want to flag up is that it says something to anyone who is here this morning who perhaps is interested to find out more about Christianity.

You're here this morning and you're not a Christian and you're wondering what Christianity is about. Matthew's genealogy tells you something very important and that is that Christianity is essentially about Jesus.

[12 : 56] That Christianity centres on, revolves around, and pivots around Jesus. Now that might sound like a staggeringly obvious point, but it's a point that is in many ways assured today because Christianity is often perceived as just being about a particular subculture, just being about a particular set of beliefs, just being about a particular way of life, about a bunch of do's and a bunch of don'ts.

But the fact is that Christianity centres on a person, on Jesus, and every true Christian will say that their understanding of Christianity is not that it's about doing certain things and not doing others, or even about believing certain things and not believing others, but it's about knowing a certain person and living your life in relation to him.

The second application, I think, is for those of us who are Christians, and it's simply the challenge of asking whether our lives pivot around Jesus and centre on Jesus in the way that Matthew's perception of reality pivots around Jesus and centres on Jesus.

Because it's so easy as Christians to disgrace Jesus from being the centre point and the pivot point of reality. To make Christianity about the do's and the don'ts.

To make Christianity about the cultural no-nos, about the communities to which we belong. To make Christianity nothing but a system of beliefs. And the challenge of this genealogy, which says that all history and all of God's ways centre on and pivot around Jesus.

[14 : 49] The challenge of that that comes to us is the challenge of asking whether our lives pivot on and centre on Jesus. Or whether they pivot on the free church and the way that the free church does things.

Or evangelicalism on the way that evangelicalism does things. or whatever other thing that you may unwittingly perhaps put in the place of Jesus and worship in his thing.

The challenge is does your life revolve around Jesus? And would you be willing to take a stand even against particular subcultures or particular expectations if you had a sense that that was what Jesus would ask you to do?

Well that's the first thing that centrality of Jesus. The second thing is this mention of brothers. You find the mention of brothers there in verse 2.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. And then you find mention again in verse 11. Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

[16 : 05] Now the mention in verse 2 of Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah of course was in a sense the great father of David.

David is often described or is remembered as David of the tribe of Judah. Jesus himself is mentioned as the lion of the tribe of Judah. Judah is a hugely significant figure.

But Judah and his brothers together comprised in a sense the fathers of Israel. They were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. And they were of staggering significance within the self-consciousness of the Jewish people.

Israel of course considers itself or considers itself to be a nation divided into twelve tribes. The twelve tribes of Israel. Israel. And those brothers are found at the end of the book of Genesis. And where they're found in the book of Genesis is very interesting because there's a sense that the existence of these twelve brothers and the tribes that will come from them is a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.

[17 : 25] I mentioned at the start that we would see something of the significance of Abraham within the genealogy as we work through it. And here's where it begins to appear. When God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees and called him to walk before him, he promised him that he would have descendants as numerous as the sand in the seashore, the stars in the sky, and that through him and through his descendants all nations under heaven would be blessed, that the world would be blessed through his innumerable descendants.

And as we come to the end of the book of Genesis, we have Abraham's, the first of Abraham's group of descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel, Judah and his brothers.

We have blessings being pronounced by Jacob upon these sons, upon these twelve tribes, blessings that will speak about their prosperity, about the way in which they will bring blessing to the rest of the world.

But in a sense, as we reach the end of the book of Genesis, of the fulfillment, or perhaps better, of the beginnings of the fulfillment of that promise to Abraham, I promise that I would give you innumerable descendants, and here are twelve fathers of twelve tribes, through whom this promise is beginning to come true.

There is a sense of God's commitment to Abraham, his promises being fulfilled. But as we move forward to that second mention of brothers, in verse eleven, it's an account of Abraham's descendants, of the twelve tribes of Israel, being carried off into exile.

[19 : 20] now, in truth, what had happened in the run-up to this, is that those twelve tribes had been divided into ten tribes of Israel, and two tribes of Judah.

The ten tribes of Israel had been deported prior to this, as part of the Assyrian conquest, and in the time of Jeconiah and his brothers, the remaining two tribes were finally carried off into exile in Babylon.

But taken together, these two events, these two conquerors, looked to the human eye like the end or the failure of God's promise to Abraham.

I promised that you would have innumerable descendants, but here now, your descendants are carried off into exile. Here now, they are removed from their land. Here now, they are smashed and conquered.

It looks like a time of failure, as though God has perhaps turned his back upon Abraham and his descendants. And yet, in verse 12 and following, we read that after the exile to Babylon, God continues to deal with his people, and the continuation of God's dealing with his people leads up to the coming of Jesus, leads up to this final, great, climactic, fulfilling act of God's redemptive work for his people.

[20 : 57] And when we bring these two mentions of brothers together, there's a sense running through them of the promises of God and of the centrality of those promises.

Jesus, the exile to Babylon mentioned in verse 11, was brought about because of the sins of God's people.

Because those who lived at the time of Jeconiah and his brothers had essentially turned their backs on God, had worshipped other gods, had failed to walk in obedience to God, and had turned away from them.

And as a consequence, God brought judgment upon them. But the point is that he remained committed to the people because of his promise to Abraham, because of his promise that they would be his people, and that through them blessing would be brought to the whole world.

And the exile and the history following the exile is as much of a testimony to the commitment of God to his promise to Abraham, as the story of Judah and his brothers.

[22 : 17] It's the story of God's commitment in the face of sin. And in fact, even if we go back to the story of Judah and his brothers, we find the story of a bunch of people who are far from perfect, who again are sinful, who throw Joseph into a well and abandon him because of their own jealousy and because of their own unpleasantness.

And yet God continues to work with them and to bless them, even in spite of their own sins. The emphasis then is that this genealogy is about the promises of God and about the promissory character of salvation.

Now again, I want us to think about that because that's what flows into the rest of the gospel. But the rest of Matthew's gospel is about the fulfillment of God's promises, about his commitment to bring blessing to the world.

But the emphasis is that it's God's worth of salvation, is that it's God who is doing this. And that's precisely why it is good news.

It's good news because it is grounded in God and in his will and not in anything about us. People often react against the fact that Christianity emphasizes that we are sinners and that we are sinners who need a saviour.

[23 : 47] That there is something unpleasant about that. But the fact is that that is the reality of our situation. And Christianity brings a gospel, brings good news, because it says that salvation is not about us somehow manufacturing goodness in ourselves, manufacturing an obedience to God out of thin air, but it's about God committing himself to deliver us from sin and doing so through Jesus.

Salvation is something rooted and grounded in God's promises and in God's commitment. Again, that's an important point if you're someone who is not a Christian and wants to know what Christianity is all about.

It's about an offer of salvation from Jesus. But it's a point that also comes to us as Christians.

Because again, our psychology, our mentality, is so often that when we feel that we are struggling with sin, so often our minds focus on our own abilities to somehow overcome that sin within our lives.

So that we feel if we just work harder, if we just pray more, if we just read more, and if we just knuckle down, we will somehow overcome this. And yet so often we are crushed in the process. Because no matter how disciplined we can be, there still come times when we slip and fail and fall into sin. And the guilt is overwhelming.

[25 : 36] And it's at times like that that we need most of all to hear this message that's found here in the genealogy in Matthew. And it's echoed through Scripture. It's echoed in Romans 7, in that passage we mentioned to the children earlier.

That our salvation is grounded not in our obedience, not in the character of our walk with God, not in my spiritual muscles, but my salvation is grounded in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

My salvation is grounded in the promises of God. My salvation is grounded in His love and in His commitment. To be sure we must respond to that love.

A Christian who is content to languish and sin is a Christian who is simply wrong-headed. A Christian who sees and feels no need to walk in obedience before God as a response to the cross is a Christian who perhaps has not considered the cross enough.

But all this, constantly, we need to remind ourselves that our salvation is grounded and rooted in the faithfulness of God to me and not in my faithfulness to Him.

[26 : 58] The final thing we see mentioned here is the mention of the women. Now we see women mentioned there in verse 3, Judah, the father of Perez and Zerath, whose mother was Tamar.

We find women mentioned there in verse 5, Rahab, Boaz, the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, and we find a mention of a woman in verse 6, David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

We also, of course, find a mention of Mary, but Mary I think is there for a different reason. She is there because as Jesus' mother, she introduces the theme of the virgin birth or the virgin conception.

She has to be mentioned in the genealogy as a link into Jesus' actual birth. Now people have seen a significance to these women. This is why I'm saying that Mary is in a sense different.

People have seen two levels of significance to the mention of these women. The first is that each of them is a foreigner. Tamar is someone who was married by one of Judah's sons and then later by Judah himself, outside of the community of believers.

[28 : 25] Rahab, of course, was someone who was involved in spying out of the promised land and who became one of God's people after she helped to deliver the spies who were part of that process.

Ruth was a Moabitess and Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, was probably like Uriah himself, a Hittite. So each of these women is a foreigner.

Each of these women is someone who is outside of the twelve tribes of Israel and belongs to the Gentile nations around them. And in mentioning these foreign women, these women who don't belong to the ethnic group of Israel, Matthew is flagging up the fact that always throughout the history of God's people, there has been a sense of the gospel going to those outside of Israel. The gospel being something for the world. And prior to Jesus, that's something that only ever drew in people from here and from there. But as we move into the story of Jesus, we find the gospel moving well outside of the bounds of Israel.

We find the gospel quite explicitly being for the salvation of the world. And again, as we recall, Abraham, we find the gospel being about the bringing of that blessing of God to the world.

[30 : 01] And again, that's an emphasis that is so important within Christianity, that Christianity is a message of salvation for all the world. And it's a message that culminates in Matthew's gospel with the great commission at the end of the gospel.

All authority has been given to me and I am sending you out to make disciples from every nation and I am with you to the end of the age.

Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples from all the world. And we as Christians this morning continue to be the recipients of that commission.

That the gospel is something that can never be content with the number that gather within these four walls. But the gospel is something that ought to be going out, bringing in people from within our community and people from every walk of life, people from every ethnic background.

And we ought to ensure that our own mentality is one that yearns and desires for people to be drawn in from every walk of life. And we ought to examine ourselves and to ask whether we perhaps unwittingly exclude those from other backgrounds.

[31 : 17] The second reason though that women are mentioned, and this is perhaps more questionable but have a think about this, is that in at least two of the cases, those women, or in at least three of the cases in fact, those women are explicitly and surprisingly sinful.

The story of Tamar is a fairly unpleasant story recounted in Genesis chapter 38. Tamar is married to Judah's son.

There's a whole strange thing that happens there, but eventually Tamar seduces Judah. And Delsos, I won't go into the story, it would take too long to go into it, but certainly her behavior is fairly distasteful.

If we move on to the story of Rahab, Rahab, who sheltered the spies, was a prostitute. So again, she's someone who is sinful in a very explicit way.

Ruth, perhaps, is not described as being sinful, but she's a Moabitess. And to come from the nation of Moab in the eyes of other Israelites was essentially to be sinful inherently.

[32 : 38] Moab was almost a byword for sinfulness, for prostitution. And then, of course, you have Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, who committed adultery with David.

again, a figure who is a sinful figure. Now, you could argue that Bathsheba was essentially used by David, and a strong case could be made for that.

But nevertheless, she's someone whose life has been marked by an explicit time of sin. And again, it's a powerful reminder to us of the shape of the gospel.

But the gospel is not a gospel for the perfect, or for the sinless, or even for the broadly good within society, for the folks who are decent, even if they maybe have the odd unpleasant thing about them, or the odd little character flaw.

The gospel is a gospel for the wretched and for the sinners. It's a reminder to each of us who is feeling wretched and sinful this morning, that God is the redeemer of people like us.

[33 : 50] It's a reminder for those who are not Christians, and who feel that they are simply too bad to become Christians, that the gospel is for them. And it's a reminder that as we share the gospel with the world, that we share it not as those who present ourselves to the world as the superior ones, as we so often do, as the ones who stand in judgment upon the world's conduct, the ones who say what you do is wrong, what you do is mistaken and evil, you are sinners.

That we share the gospel by saying we are sinners, and the gospel is for all of us. There's a reminder there in the inclusion of these women, and the fact, the astonishing fact, that they are included, not as marginal players in the history of the church or of God's people, but as central, as part of the very lineage of Jesus.

The spectacular and astonishing fact that the saviour of the world has a great, great grandmother who is a prostitute. The saviour of the world has a great, great, great grandmother who seduces her father-in-law.

The saviour of the world comes from the lineage of the sinful. And it's a message not about the sinfulness of Jesus, because Jesus, of course, is born through a virgin birth.

Jesus, of course, is a new creation in himself. But it's a message about the fact that God uses, in powerful and spectacular ways, sinners as part of his kingdom.

[35 : 44] Well, we've seen then something in the genealogy of Matthew, and we see something of the way in which it ties in to the rest of the gospel. I realised just a moment ago that I forgot to mention something in my very first point.

And it's perhaps an appropriate point to come back to hear as we draw this to a close. I mentioned at the beginning in terms of the group of 14 generations that there were at least two reasons why Matthew arranges his material that way.

And I forgot to give you the second. The second that people have often seen is that this grouping into 14 generations is a play on the name David.

Because the name David in Hebrew has a numerical value of 14. It's to do with the way in which numbers are written in the Hebrew alphabet using letters, and that's based on the numerical value of each letter within the alphabet.

the V is a 4, the W or the V is a 6, and the final D is another 4. There's no vowels, and it all adds up to 14.

[36 : 55] And many people have said, well, perhaps the reason why this genealogy is grouped into 14 is it's a play on the numerical value of David's name, because Jesus is presented as the son of David.

Now, I'm not entirely sure about that. I'm not entirely convinced. But the point that they're making is valid, that this genealogy flags up the fact that Jesus is the son of David.

And by that, Matthew means that Jesus is the king. And that, in a sense, is the most obvious meaning of the word, Christ. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one.

He is the one who has been anointed to be the king. Matthew prepares us for the fact that Jesus will take up David's empty throne.

And yet, there's a surprise in store. And that surprise is that Jesus doesn't simply take up David's empty throne within Israel. But Jesus fuses David's empty throne with God's throne.

[38 : 04] It becomes clear that Jesus is not simply the king over Israel, but that Jesus is the king over all reality. Because Jesus is not simply the son of David, but Jesus is the son of God.

The kingship that Jesus has is a kingship before which not only Israel and the Jews must bow, but it's a kingship before which all humanity must bow.

it's a kingship before which all humanity is portrayed as bow in Matthew chapter 25 as he judges the nations. And it's a kingship that undergirds Jesus' commission to his disciples in Matthew 28 to go into the world and make disciples of all nations because all authority has been given to him.

And I want to close with that point. we are here in the middle of Advent in the run up to Christmas.

And for all that we know that the true spirit of Christmas is to buy a scale extra kit from Argus, the fact is that we need to challenge the world that perceives the true spirit of Christmas in that way.

But to remind them that Christmas is not simply the cosy image of a child lying in a warm manger surrounded by animals in a warmly lit barn.

[39 : 39] But Christmas is the story of the incarnation of Jesus into a brutal, cold, hard world in order that he could redeem and save that cold, hard world and bring it under his own kingship and his own lordship.

because his own kingship is a good kingship. His own lordship is the only way to true salvation and to true joy.

And all of this is rooted in the commitment and love of God, promised to Abraham, promised to David and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And a reminder that as we speak and sing of Christmas, we are speaking and singing of the incarnation of the one who is now king of kings, lord of lords, ruler over all things.
Amen.