

Witney – Thursday 17 December 2020

Finding out about your ancestry has become increasingly popular recently. In part this is because the Internet makes the task much easier and in part it's because of the popularity of TV programmes like *Who do you think you are*. But the interest in ancestry is not new, and was very important in cultures before writing became widespread and straightforward: if you didn't know who your ancestors were and could recite it, it would be forgotten. Even Julius Caesar managed to trace his ancestry back to the goddess Venus. What a shame he didn't make it on to *Who do you think you are*!

The Jews were no different, and there are a number of genealogies in the Old Testament, not least the opening chapters of 1 Chronicles, so it's not surprising that two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, include genealogies for Jesus. What is surprising is that after David the genealogies are completely different; even their names for Joseph's father are different. I don't think anyone knows why. But what they do share is that their genealogies lead up to Joseph, even though they acknowledge he was not Jesus's actual father: strange!

I'll focus on today's gospel, from Matthew, and leave Luke for someone else at another time, apart from a brief point that I'll make later. And I'll try and make two points.

First, the opening sentence. Opening sentences in the Gospels are important as we have learnt over the last few weeks. John's great proclamation "In the beginning was the Word", recalling the opening of the book Genesis; Luke's literacy explanation to his sponsor, Theophilus; Mark's characteristically abrupt "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ". Or Matthew's opening: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" in the NRSV, which we've just heard, or "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" if you prefer the King James version. I happen to believe that the NRSV's translation is inadequate and that King James version is better. The Greek says—and we all need a bit of Greek before pre-lunch drinks in about half an hour!

“Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυεὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ.”

Biblos, the book of the something of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. But what is the something? Geneseōs comes from genesis, beginning, birth, generation, perhaps, but not usually genealogy. And the genealogy isn't a book. So I think in this sentence Matthew is introducing his whole book, where he will show that Jesus brings a new birth, a new genesis, if you like, but one that isn't a break with the past, but a fulfilment of it. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, is the one whom God has promised Israel through the ages, is, as prophesied, the son of David and of Abraham, and is the fulfilment and heir of God's promise to them. Not bad for eight words of Greek!

As far as the actual genealogy itself is concerned, well you could argue it's the most boring gospel in the calendar—all those names: you try reading it on Zoom!

But there is more to it than that. In Jewish culture descent was through the male line. In genealogies it's only men who count. And Luke—my promised other comment—only refers to men.

But Matthew mentions four women, apart, of course, from Mary herself; and they are a strange choice. There are plenty of worthy mothers who might be mentioned: Sarah and Rebecca, the wives of Abraham and Isaac, for example. But the four Matthew mentions are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and 'the wife of Uriah', Matthew's rather mealy-mouthed way of referring to Bathsheba. The four have two things in common.

First, they are all foreigners: Tamar and Rahab are Canaanites, Ruth, a Moabite, Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite.

Second, they all have a rather dodgy sexual history.

Tamar's story is eye-opening—read it in Genesis 38—but after losing two husbands who had offended God, she disguises herself as a prostitute, entices her widowed father-in-law Judah to go to bed with her, and gives birth to twin boys.

Rahab is a prostitute pure and simple—well, perhaps not pure—but someone who risks her life to save two Israelite spies.

I may be a bit unkind to Ruth, but she wins her husband Boaz after seductively winding herself round his feet, not the action of a nice Jewish girl.

And Bathsheba, who King David seduced, then murdering her husband so that he could marry her. We may feel that she was not at fault, but her contemporaries would not have been so tolerant.

So what is Matthew saying? He doesn't tell us, so we can only speculate. But I think he is saying that the message Jesus brings, the Kingdom he proclaims, is not just for God's promised people, the Jews, but is for all people, Jew and Gentile, male and female, virtuous and pretty dodgy, all are called to the banquet if they repent and turn to Christ. And, of course it confirms what Matthew was saying in his first sentence

Good news for us, which we still need to hear, and good news for the young churches for whom the Gospels were written, and by the end of the first century included Jews and gentiles, the wealthy and the outcasts, and who would take heart when they knew that people like them were among the ancestors of Jesus. There is, I suggest, quite a lot to learn again from what at first sight seemed just a rather boring list of names.