The Shamed
Matthew 1:1-25

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, over the four Sundays of Advent, we're going to look at who it was that Christ came for. And on one level, that's easy. He came for everyone. Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible says, 'For God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son…' And yet, as the gospel writers tell us about the circumstances of Christ's birth, and the events leading up to it, they're selective, and certain people, and certain types of people, get mentioned. They take it from the general - Christ came for all, and they become more specific.

And think why they do that. Imagine you want to buy something, and it's expensive, so you feel like you have to justify it. But what you say to justify it is going to depend on who you're trying to justify it to. Let's say you're a guy and you want to buy a new car - and let's say you're married - how will you justify it to your wife? It's a good price, and it's very economical, and it's safe, very safe. But to your friend…? Man, look at its top speed, look how it takes the corners, look at all the gizmos inside!

We always do this. When we're telling a story, when we're trying to persuade someone, we're going to emphasise different things to get our message across. And when it comes to their accounts of Christ's birth, the gospel writers are telling us history, but they do so with a message. And by who they mention around the edges of the story, they're telling us, Christ came for all, this is good news of great joy for all people, but in particular, he came for these.

And what you discover as you look at these accounts, is that you find yourself somewhere among them. So, over the next weeks we're going to see how he came for the outsider, for the poor, for the elite, and today, for the shamed.

The One Who Fulfils the Promises
Look how the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, that Ameline read to us, begins: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' (Matt 1:1).

Now, when you meet someone for the first time, and you're trying to get to know them a bit, maybe suss them out, what kind of questions do you ask? Where are you from? What do you do for a job? Why are you here in Switzerland? And you're trying to situate them, aren't you. Because where you're from says something about you. A few Sundays back I interviewed Andrew Parris, and when he said that he comes from Hollywood, everyone sits up and goes, 'oooh! Hollywood! A film star!' And when I asked him about his career, and he said he used to be a rocket engineer, everyone goes, 'oooh and double oooh! A film star and an astronaut!'

Well, when you read in the gospel accounts that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, for a Jewish reader that would have been a sit-up-and-listen moment, because Bethlehem was the town of David, the great king.

But so too would Jesus's genealogy. Because in that world, your genealogy was like your CV, your resumé. If today, your CV says you trained here, and this person was your supervisor, and these are your degrees and here is your list of skills. So in the ancient world your genealogy said, this is who you are, this is the stock, the line you come from. This is your pedigree: it's who you're from, your DNA, and who you and your family know.

And maybe on your CV you have some bite-size summary of you and your skills, well, verse 1 is Matthew's bite size introduction to who Jesus is: the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.

And so Matthew starts by laying claim, on Jesus' behalf, to the two greatest lines of promise in the Old Testament. That from David's line would come a king who would reign in righteousness for ever. And Matthew says, Jesus is *that* Son of David. But even more than that, there would be an offspring of Abraham through whom the whole world would be blessed. And Matthew says, Jesus is *that* offspring of Abraham.

So right at the start, Matthew is saying, these two great streams of promise and hope, of a king who brings righteousness and justice and peace, *and* world-wide blessing, have come together and flow together in Jesus. He is the fulfilment of promise.

And with that sort of intro, you're expecting great things from the rest of the genealogy. And they're there. But what's surprising is, it's not the great things that Matthew chooses to highlight. In all the names of Jesus' ancestors, only four women get mentioned. Five, if you count Mary, Jesus' mother. And the extraordinary thing is that, if you were wanting to impress with your genealogy, your ancient CV, you wouldn't have included them. Because they're either foreigners - racial outsiders, and we'll look at them another time, or women whose sexual history made them outsiders. People who had done things, and lived lives, that people looking to be impressed would have considered shameful.

So why does Matthew include them? Because he didn't have to, did he? No other women get mentioned, so why mention Tamar and Rahab and Bathsheba?

The One Who Inhabits our Shame

Genesis chapters 37 and 39 tell the story of Joseph. Chapter 37 tells how he was sold into slavery by his brothers, including Judah, his older brother. And chapter 39 tells how he resisted sexual temptation in Potiphar's house in Egypt. Joseph's story is the story of a young man being badly treated and yet behaving righteously. And yet, Christ was not descended from Joseph, but from his brother, Judah. And we get his story in chapter 38, sandwiched between the accounts of Joseph. And if Joseph presents the picture of a young man living right, that is to increase the contrast with Judah who is doing anything but.

You see, whereas Joseph was forced apart from his brothers against his will in chapter 37, chapter 38 opens by telling us that Judah separated from them willingly, and went off and fell in love with, and married, a Canaanite woman. And their first son was called Er. And Judah took Tamar as a wife for Er. But Er was so bad, Genesis tells us God put him to death. So Judah gave Tamar his second son, Onan, as a husband, but he was also so bad he got put to death.

So Judah promises Tamar that when his third son is old enough he'll give him to her, but in the meantime, while she waited, she should go back to her father's house. But Judah reneges on his promise, effectively leaving Tamar trapped as a perpetual widow.

So when Judah is out on a business trip Tamar lies in wait, by the roadside, dressed as a prostitute. And Judah, her father-in-law, takes the bait, and sleeps with her, his daughter-in-law, and Tamar gets pregnant. And three months later, when it becomes clear that his daughter-in-law must have

been sexually immoral with some man, Judah demands she be burnt alive. Only Tamar has proof that Judah was the man.

It's a sordid story worthy of Andrew's home town of Hollywood. And yet, it's through that shameful event in Tamar's life, that the line of Jesus, the line of the Messiah came. Verse 2-3: 'Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.'

Now, I suspect that all of our family trees have the odd black sheep of the family in them. But no sooner are we done with Tamar than we read in v5, 'And Salmon the father of Boaz *by Rahab*.' And if Tamar *pretended* to be a prostitute, Rahab was one for real. She was also the only person in Jericho to welcome the Israelites and shelter the 3 men sent to spy out the city. And when Israel invaded and took Jericho, Joshua 6:17 tells us that, 'Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her' survived. But while she is commended for seeing in the Israelites what no one else was seeing, Rahab *the prostitute*, was how she was seen. And yet despite the fact that Jesus line passed through any number of more sexually virtuous women whom Matthew could have chosen, it's Rahab, the prostitute, who Matthew highlights.

But then there's a third: verse 6: 'Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*.' And Bathsheba is not even named directly, is she. She's simply, 'the wife of Uriah.' All those centuries later, the Bible still refuses to brush David's sin under the carpet. Bathsheba was, and remains, Uriah's wife. And yet, again, it is through the sin and shame of Bathsheba's relationship with David, which today would surely fall under the hashtag 'metoo', of powerful men using women, that Jesus' line passes.

Now, in each case, being included in the line of the Messiah does something to these shamed women, doesn't it? It gives them dignity. It lifts them up. It tells the world that God has chosen them, even them. That God chooses the shamed, and the sexually broken, even those whose pasts are full of dark holes, and skeletons in cupboards, to be a part of his salvation history.

You see, in the Bible, God is always lifting people's shame through childbirth. Today, infertility can be hugely painful, and for some - especially when other family members are having kids - there can also be a tinge of shame attached to it: 'No-one else has problems conceiving, except us.' But in the ancient world, where children were considered a blessing and infertility a curse, there was a special measure of shame attached to infertility. And time and again God comes and lifts that shame: Samson's mother, who the book of Judges describes as 'barren', gives birth to Samson who will deliver his people; Hannah gives birth to Samuel, who will lead the people; Elizabeth gives birth to John the Baptist; and way back, Leah, who compared to her sister, Rachel, was the unattractive and unloved wife of Jacob, gave birth to Judah, the one through whom Jesus' line passed.

So we shouldn't be surprised that the Lord lifts Tamar's and Rahab's and Bathsheba's shame, by highlighting them in Christ's genealogy. God's always doing that.

But there is one woman in this genealogy for whom this is not the case. You see, for all these others, involvement in Christ's line lifts their shame, but not for Mary. Look at v18, 'Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.' Now, just imagine people's reactions to that: 'From the Holy Spirit, you had an angel visit you, and now you're pregnant. Sure

that's what happened Mary.' And for Mary, to be pregnant out of marriage was hugely, hugely shameful. For her and her family. It's why Joseph responds the way he does: v19, 'And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.' Joseph is no idiot. He knows where babies come from, and because he's a good man he wants to minimise her shame as much as he can, so he will do this all on the quiet.

So, Mary is innocent, but even the person who knows her best, and loves her best, does not believe her. It takes a visit by an angel to change his mind.

And it's clear from the gospels, that Jesus carries that stigma for the rest of his life - one born out of wedlock. And his opponents occasionally goad him with it: 'we're not illegitimate… unlike some we could mention'. And Jewish writers repeated the gossip, that he was the fruit of an affair between Mary and a Roman soldier. Not just born out of wedlock, but to someone who slept with the enemy.

So it's not just that, here, in this passage, we see involvement with Jesus *lifting* the shame of Tamar and Rahab and Bathsheba, we see Jesus taking shame upon himself. He comes and inhabits the world of the shamed. It's why when Matthew records the angel telling Joseph, v21, "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins", he goes on to say, v22, 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us.)' Immanuel, the God who comes and inhabits our broken worlds of shame.

Now, of course, our current culture has dramatically shifted in what it considers shameful. What only a generation or so ago would have been considered shameful is now celebrated. But of course that does not mean that shame has disappeared. In fact, it would be fair to argue that more than ever our culture is one of honour and shame. If you fit in with the cultural pattern, and bow before the cultural gods, you're honoured, but if you don't, you're shamed. And once you are out of favour there is little chance of finding your way back.

But when Christ comes, he does something very different.

The One who Bears our Burdens

Jesus was once invited to dine at the house of a Pharisee. And while he was there, Luke describes how, 'A woman of the city, who was a sinner' (Luke 7:37) came and wept on him and anointed him. And the Pharisee watched on in horror, even disgust, because he knew what kind of woman this prostitute was. Verse 39, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Can you see what the Pharisee is doing? He does what we all so often do, he's putting her into a box. The box labelled 'sinners', the box of the shamed.

And, religious people do that. Becuase, if we can label others as sinners, it makes us who are not like that feel better about ourselves. And yet, it's not just the religious who do that. Secular people do it too. In the UK at the moment, a young black actress, who's a Christian, has taken her case to court. She was recently fired from a lead role in a stage production of Colour Purple, because of a Facebook post where she expressed her views on homosexuality and marriage - views which just a few years ago would have been considered the norm. But now, just expressing those views is

enough to have you put in the box labelled sinner - a transgressor, persona non grata, you're beyond the pail.

But while the religious and the secular shame, Jesus doesn't. He knew very well what kind of woman this was who was weeping on him at the Pharisee's house. Jesus was not naive, nor did he brush people's sins under the carpet, anymore than David's sin was brushed under the carpet. But rather than put this woman in that box and seal the lid, he lifts her out. He shows her mercy, and love - maybe the first man who has ever done that, and sends her away forgiven.

And when criticised by the religious leaders for eating and drinking with people like her, Jesus replied, "Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you." (Matt 21:31). Can you see how revolutionary that was? Jesus was talking to people who had made their religion their career. These were men at the top of the religious tree. They knew who went in what box. And Jesus says, women like this woman, women like Tamar, and Rahab, and Bathsheba; women like that young actress; men and women the religious and secular worlds shame, enter the kingdom of God while the self-righteous are left outside. Because if religion divides people into the good and the bad, and the world divides into the woke and the unwoke, the gospel says, the real division is between the humble and the proud. And those who enter the kingdom are those who're humble enough to admit they can never be good enough, and look to Christ instead.

You see, in one of the great prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, the Lord said through Isaiah, "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations… a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench." (Is 42:1, 3).

When you feel shame for your own sin, or when you're shamed by others, either because of how they have treated you, and made you feel worthless, or how they speak of you, maybe because you don't meet their standards, you feel bruised, and it wouldn't take much to break you. You feel like a candle that's as good as out. And the religious and secular worlds, intentionally or unintentionally, can snuff you out. Jesus never does.

In Isaiah chapter 9, right before those great verses that say, 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders', Isaiah says, 'For the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.' (Is 9:4). In other words, a Child is born, a Son is given, to lift from you the oppressive, crushing burden of shame.

But look how Isaiah says he will do it: 'as on the day of Midian'. In the book of Judges, the Israelites faced the overwhelming power of the Midianite army. And to rescue them from that, God chose Gideon, a man who hid from the enemy, who was from the most insignificant family, in the most insignificant tribe in Israel. And then God had him whittle his army down until there was practically nothing left. Why? Because God was going to save them through their weakness not their strength.

And at Advent we see God do it again, as on the day of Midian. As Christ, our ultimate rescuer comes as the weakest thing imaginable, a baby, and is crucified in weakness, and experiences all the shame and humiliation of the cross. And as he does, he doesn't just experience our shame, he takes it on himself. He lifts it off of us, and carries it. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'for the joy set

before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame.' (Heb 12:2) The joy of lifting the burden of shame from you, and of welcoming you into his kingdom as one dearly loved.

You see, at Advent, we don't just look back at what Jesus has done for us. We look forward, to when he comes again, when his kingdom - promised so long ago to David - will come in all its fulness, and every tear of shame will be wiped away, when we will know, far better than we know now, that because of Jesus, all our shame for all our sin is gone, and in its place we are loved, accepted, and forgiven.