Return of the King
Matthew 1:1-25

Today we start a new series looking at the Gospel according to Matthew. Now, in the New Testament there are four books, four gospels, written by four different men, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, that tell the story of Jesus. And they're called gospels, because that word means 'good news'. So when we say we're starting looking at the Gospel according to Matthew, what we're really saying is, we're looking at the Good News about Jesus, written by Matthew, one of his first disciples.

But for a book that claims to be good news, Matthew starts in a strange way, because he starts with a genealogy, a list of names of who was descended from whom. And when you get to a genealogy in the Bible most of us don't think, 'wonderful, this is good news, I get to read a genealogy!' In fact, you immediately start turning the page to see how long it goes on for!

So why does Matthew stick one at the beginning of his Good News? Well, apart from the fact that you'd think differently if your name was there, Matthew clearly had reasons for doing it, didn't he. You see over the next 28 chapters he's going to tell us about Jesus – about his life, his teaching and ultimately about his death and resurrection. But none of us just appear out of thin air, do we? We all come from somewhere. And so did Jesus. And so Matthew's going to tell us who Jesus is, and where he comes from.

Reading: Matthew 1:1-25

So this morning we're going to look at the who, where and why of Jesus: who is he, where did he come from, and why did he come.

Jesus: Who is He?
Now, have you ever heard of a man called Hermann Rorschach? Well, he was a Swiss psychologist and in 1921 he invented the infamous, inkblot test. And in the inkblot test the patient is shown 10 different inkblots and asked what they see. And from their responses you're supposed to be able to assess their personality, their emotions, what makes them tick, what's going on deep down in their psyche. And all from an inkblot! Because when it comes to what you see in an inkblot there are no right or wrong answers are there? It's about what *you* see.

Well, is Jesus just another inkblot? 'What do you see? What is he to you?' 'Well he was a Jewish revolutionary.' 'Or a fine moral example.' 'Or a perceptive teacher.' Does any answer go? Can Jesus be to you whatever you want him to be?

Well, not according to the gospels, and especially not according to Matthew.

Look at v1: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.'

Who is Jesus? Well, firstly Matthew says he's Jesus Christ. Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the anointed one. And in Israel it was the King who was anointed, so in his very first line Matthew says, 'I'm going to tell you about Messiah Jesus, about Jesus the King.'

But then look what he says next about him: v1 again, 'Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.'

Now imagine if this was happening in your country. Imagine the two most famous leaders in your nation's history: imagine if you were American and someone was described as 'the son of Abraham Lincoln, the son of George Washington.' Or if you're British, 'the son of Winston Churchill, the son of King Alfred.' Well, if you were from a Jewish background, the names of David and Abraham were filled with meaning.

David was King David, King of Israel, Israel's greatest king. The king who ruled justly, who was mighty in battle, who conquered nations. The king to whom God promised in 2 Samuel 7 that he would one day have a son whose throne and kingdom would last forever. The king from whose family the prophet Isaiah foresaw, in Isaiah 9, a son being born who would rule with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forever. And Matthew is saying, 'and Jesus is that son.'

Now over the last few weeks we've been watching the *The Lord of the Rings* films with the girls and if you've read the book or seen the films you'll know that the third and final volume is called *The Return of the King*, where Aragorn, the rightful heir to the throne of Gondor, returns and is crowned king. And here, in the first verse, it's as if Matthew is saying 'David's greatest son, the King, has returned.'

But, of course, David wasn't the only man to whom God promised an offspring who would be great. God's covenant with Israel began with his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, that in him all the families on earth would be blessed. But then in Genesis 22 God narrows that down and tells Abraham that 'in your *offspring* shall all nations of the earth be blessed' (Gen 22:18). So from Abraham's descendants, would come one who would bring God's grace to every nation. And that offspring has come, Matthew says: v1 again, 'Jesus Christ, son of David, *son of Abraham*.'

Now, if you were Jewish at the time of Jesus' birth, it probably felt as if God's promises of a righteous ruler and divine blessing were further away from coming true than ever. Sure they'd returned from exile in Babylon, but hardly to the glorious future they'd hoped for. And here they were, once more under the boot of a foreign oppressor, this time Rome. Plus, God hadn't spoken to them through a prophet for over 400 years. And the current king of the Jews, King Herod, wasn't even Jewish. So much for God's promises of a king in David's line who would defeat their enemies! So much for an offspring of Abraham who would bring world-wide blessing!

And yet, Messianic expectation was rife at the time. Everyone was looking for the Messiah to come. Now why was that? Because before trouble breaks your will, it leaves you longing for deliverance, doesn't it? Maybe you've experienced it: you go through a painful, difficult time and you long for God to do something, to intervene, to turn things around. And Matthew starts his gospel by saying, 'God *has* done something. Something extraordinary. His promised king, the one who will bring universal blessing, has come.'

But this King doesn't just bring hope for 1st century Jews, but for 21st century gentiles, like you and me, too, whatever it is you face. You see, when you go for a walk in the mountains there is that moment when you reach the top, and you know you've arrived. This is it. You're at the summit. Well, Matthew is saying that that summit is Jesus. He is the pinnacle. He is the ultimate fulfilment of all that God has promised. He is the answer to everything you long for.

So, the extraordinary thing about the opening to this gospel, at least it may seem extraordinary to our 21st century ears, is that the story Matthew is going to tell, is not going to be, first of all, about you and me. It's going to be about Jesus. Sometimes it can seem that unless I'm centre stage of the story, unless this is about my self-actualisation, or my empowerment, I'm not really interested. But as strange as it might seem, God's promises and God's plans don't find their fulfilment or ultimate meaning in you or me, but in Christ. And the story that God has been writing through all history is about him.

But if that's who Jesus is, Matthew answers a second question as well:

Where did he come from?
Winston Churchill once famously said that the British and the Americans are one people divided by a common language. But the differences go deeper than how we pronounce the word tomato, don't they? One of the fascinating things about most Americans I've met is the sense they have of where their families have come from. You see in Britain you're just British. Your family might be English or Welsh or Scottish, but that's about as much roots as we can muster. But Americans can tell you that their great-great grandparents came from Germany or Italy or Ireland or wherever. They have this sense of family history.

But if that's impressive it pales in comparison to how an Israelite could trace his background. And in chapter 1 Matthew gives us Jesus' roots, spanning 2000 years of Israel's history. And the first part maps Jesus' line from Abraham to King David.

But if David was the high-water mark, the exile in Babylon was the low. If David was the mountain-top, the exile was the abyss into which Israel sank. And the second section of the genealogy traces Jesus' line from David to the exile - a time of catastrophic loss – both for individuals and for the nation.

And yet, what Matthew tells us is that even in those dark days of descent and decline, God was still working out his plan, weaving his story in the life of his people, until Christ came. That in all the destruction, in all the trauma, amongst an unfaithful people, God stayed faithful and continued Messiah's line. But if you'd been there, if you had lived through those dark days, you would probably have thought God had abandoned you, and given up on his promises, when all the time he was at work, behind the scenes, moving steadily to the crescendo of Christ's coming.

And he still does the same today. You go through stuff, you face trial and tragedy and you question, 'God where are you in all this? I can't see you at work in this.' But he's at work, working in the dark, weaving behind the scenes, working all

things for good, not until Christ is born, but until Christ is formed in us. Using even these days of seeming despair to transform us ever more into the likeness of his Son.

And so the third section of the genealogy traces Jesus' line from the valley of the Exile to what? When God restores Israel, what is the mountain-top this time? And Matthew says the climax of Israel's history is Jesus. And to show the symmetry of it all he says, v17: 'So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.'

But the incredible thing is that if you look at Jesus' family tree it's not exactly a portrait hall of glorious heroes, is it? Because whilst there are some good men there, men you'd be glad to have as ancestors, there are plenty of bad. There are liars and cheats, murderers and adulterers; the arrogant and the greedy. Don't you think that's remarkable? Jesus doesn't come from good, clean, middle-class stock, does he? He comes from a family that looks like yours, or at least it looks like mine. He comes into the mess of our world and identifies with people like us.

And nowhere is that clearer than in the women Matthew singles out, because there are four of them and everyone of them was an outsider.

There's Tamar, the Canaanite, and Rahab another Canaanite, and Ruth, the Moabite, the dirt-poor economic migrant, and Bathsheba who was married to Uriah, a Hittite. Now if you were writing women into the genealogy of the great King, the promised Messiah, wouldn't you write in some classier ladies? Like the four Jewish matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah? So why doesn't Matthew? Because from the beginning Matthew wants you to know that Jesus hasn't just come for Isreal, he's come for the world, he's come for you.

And he hasn't just come for gentiles, he's come for sinners. Because the first three of these ladies were all tainted by sexual sin. Tamar had an incestuous relationship with her father-in-law, Judah. Rahab was a prostitute. And as for Bathsheba, David's wife, Matthew doesn't give us her name, he simply reminds us in v6 that in actual fact she was 'the wife of Uriah', i.e. she's an adulteress.

And so in his coming into the world, Jesus ties himself to the mess of real people's lives, the mess that many of us know first hand, even the mess of our sexual sin.

But of course if those women experienced the shame of sin, Mary, Jesus' mother, would face that same shame. Verse 18: '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, CS Lewis coined the term *Chronological Snobbery* to refer to the idea that because these folk lived so long ago, they must have been intellectually inferior to us. And whilst back then people might have been taken in by the idea of a virgin birth, we're not so foolish.

But listen, if you find the idea of a virgin conceiving hard to swallow, what did Joseph think? I mean, Joseph knows what's happened, doesn't he? Or at least he thinks he does. Mary's betrothed to him, but she must have slept with someone else. And because he was a good man, even though he could have, he wasn't going to bring the full weight of the law down upon her. Verse 19, he was 'unwilling to put her to shame.' He could have added to the shame of her illegitimate pregnancy by making it all very public and exposing her for what she'd done. But he doesn't. Verse 19 again, he 'resolved to divorce her quietly.' But he did *resolve* to divorce her.

Which is when God steps in: v20, 'An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife."' Now firstly, do you see how he addresses him? 'Joseph, *son of David*. Joseph, this is your heritage; this is your turn; the time has come for *you* to play your part in God's salvation plan.' But secondly, he tells him not to fear to take Mary as his wife. So fear, fear of what others might think: the looks, the comments, the stigma, the humiliation, could have stopped Joseph finding his place in Jesus' story.

And the same can be true of us, can't it? Fear of others can stop us publically associating ourselves with Christ or his people. Fear of what others might say or think can stop us doing the right thing when we're faced with a moral dilemma. Or maybe Joseph was afraid of the future – of what taking on Mary and her son would mean. But the thing we should fear is not being inside, or living according to God's will, is it? It is living our life outside of that will. That is where danger lies. And a fear of others should never stop us from doing what God tells us to do. Because you know whose word, and whose opinion of you, matters more.

And so the angel says to Joseph: 'For what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit' (Matt 1:20). Now, if you think it too incredible and unbelievable that God would bring about a virgin conception, can I ask you why? Is it that you think God does not have the power to do this, that it's impossible? Or do you think he wouldn't do this? But in either case, aren't you simply creating God in your image? And who are you to tell the God for whom all things are possible what he can or cannot do?

Instead, you and I should marvel as the limitless, all powerful, all wise God, joins his nature to our human nature and is formed as a tiny, growing baby boy in the womb of an unknown peasant girl. As Matthew tells us God fulfils what he promised through Isaiah, 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.)'

So in all the mess of our world, in all the mess of our lives and our own messy family trees, it is God who reaches out and reaches down to us. And in Jesus he becomes one of us: fully man and fully God.

And through God speaking to him, Joseph finds the courage to obey God rather than be swayed by what others might say. And it's as you and I hear God speaking to us, through his word, as you realise as Matthew says here of Isaiah,

that this book, is the Lord speaking through the writer, that you too can find the courage and the power to obey him.

But if that's who Jesus is and where he comes from, the third question Matthew answers is:

Why did he come?
Now at the time when Jesus was born, there was all this expectation around the coming of a Messiah. And yet, no-one could agree on what that Messiah would do when he came. About the only thing they could agree on was that he would deliver them from their enemies. Except they couldn't agree who their enemies were! Was it Rome, or Herod? Was it the rich elite, or the dangerously religious poor?

And the same is true today, isn't it? If you were to ask someone, what do you need saving or rescuing from, you'd either be met by a blank stare, or a whole load of different answers: 'What's the greatest problem I face?' Big government, or that annoying work colleague, or my loveless marriage, or substance addiction, or poverty, or climate change.

But the angel tells Joseph what it is Christ has come to do: v21, "She [Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." You see, as Joseph would have known very well, the name Jesus means, 'YHWH saves', or as one commentator puts it, 'God to the rescue.' But rescue from what? What were their, what are our enemies that he has come to rescue us from. And the answer, as untrendy as it seems, is: our sins.

You see, whatever you or I might think is the biggest issue we, or anyone else, or the whole of humanity faces, or needs rescuing from, the gospel tells us that the gravest, most serious issue is our own sin. That's the cancer that eats away at our lives and our societies: the self-centredness that destroys marriages and relationships. The pride that sinks an unbridgeable gulf between us and God. The covetous desire for more that idolises stuff and money. And that's what Christ has come to do, Matthew tells us: to save us from our sin, because that is a much greater enemy than Rome, or any modern political power. It is a much greater, present danger than climate change or financial insecurity. It is *the* core problem under all these other problems. It is the problem of the human heart, of our hearts, and Christ has come to deal with it.

And as Matthew goes along, he'll make it clear that the extraordinary thing is how Christ will rescue us – by giving his life in our place. And so the truly unbelievable thing about the gospel, is not that Christ was born of a virgin, but that he was born at all. That the King of heaven and earth, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Son of God, would come to give his life for people like us.