The Genealogy of Jesus
Matthew 1:1-18

So this is the third Sunday of Advent, and this morning I want us to look at how Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth, because I can almost guarantee you that if it has been you are me writing this we would not have chosen to start the Christmas story where he does.

You see, Matthew had at hand a whole load of material that he could have started with that would have grabbed your attention, and had you hooked from the start, and left you thinking, 'wow! Seriously? That happened?' I mean, he could have begun by introducing us to Mary, a vulnerable teenage girl chosen to bear Jesus, to help us see the deeply human side of all that follows; he could have started by telling us about angels, messengers from God, appearing to Joseph, telling him 'Joseph, you've got to think again'; he could have got us to lift our eyes to the night sky and see the great star lighting up the sky, or lower them to the desert and see the foreign magi it guided. He could have picked any of those, but he doesn't. Instead how does he start? He starts his account of Jesus' birth by giving us Jesus' genealogy.

And there's nothing like a good genealogy to switch-off your average 21st Century reader, is there? So, why would Matthew begin the extraordinary events of Bethlehem with a list of 'and so and so no.1 was the father of so and so no.2; and so and so no.2 was the father of so and so no.3 and so on'?

Well, firstly, Matthew is saying, what you're going to read about happened. This birth is about a real person who was born, with a real family tree. It isn't a myth, it's not make believe, it's not 'once upon a time in a land far away.' The events of that first Christmas are rooted in history, and in a family.

But secondly, in that culture, your genealogy, your family tree, was like your CV, it was your resumé. Today, if you want to tell people who you are and where you're from you tell them, well, I did my bachelors here and my masters there, and my PhD, there. And these are the companies I've worked for, these are the positions I've held, these are the papers I've published, these are the conferences I've spoken at, these are the events I've organised.

But in Matthew's day what people wanted to know was, who's your father? who's your grandfather? Tell me where you come from, what family are you from?

And so when Matthew starts with Jesus' genealogy, it's not a *slightly dull* list of names, it's 'this is who Mary carried; this is whose birth the angels announced. This is who the magi came to visit. This is who the baby in the stable is. Let me give you his resumé.'

And if that's the case, this genealogy tells us some extraordinary things.

Reading: Matthew 1:1-18

We're going to look at three points: the faithfulness of God; the greatness of Christ and the grace of Jesus.

The Faithfulness of God
Now when you hear the word 'Christmas', what comes into your mind? This year, maybe it'll be John and the boys being angel fighter pilots, or Madam 'Alo and her baguette! Or maybe you hear

‘Christmas’ and think shopping, or gift buying, or great food - like mince pies. Or, maybe religiously, you hear ‘Christmas’ and think, Mary and Joseph and a stable.

But by beginning with Jesus’ genealogy, Matthew wants something else to come to your mind, and that’s God’s faithfulness to keep his promises over thousands of years, even when you think he’s let you down.

Look how it all begins: v1, ‘The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.’ And Abraham and David were the two key men in Israel’s past who God had made incredible promises to. To Abraham he promised that “in your offspring shall all nations of the earth be blessed” (Gen 22:18); and to David he promised, “I will raise up your offspring… and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:12-13).

So when Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth by telling us that Jesus is son of David and son of Abraham, he’s saying ‘that’s who Jesus is.’ That the offspring God had promised to those two men has come - and it’s this baby in the manger. That the one through whom God promised to bless all nations, and the one whose kingdom will never end, has arrived. That God has kept his promises.

And kept them over years - hundreds, thousands, of years - when it looked like he hadn’t. You see, this genealogy stretches over 2000 years of Israel’s history. And during those 2000 years there would have been plenty of years when it would have felt like God had abandoned his promises.

Just look at the rag-tag list of David’s descendants in v7-11. Even the good guys in that list, men, kings, like ‘Solomon… Jehoshaphat… Uzziah… Jotham… Hezekiah… and Josiah’ messed up. And others in the list did way worse. And so as a list of leaders it represents decades of failed leadership, and with none of them would you have thought, ‘the promised Son of David has come!’ Instead, there is this relentless, downward trajectory to failure; to the point, v11 of ‘the time of the deportation to Babylon’ and the nation all but destroyed. And far from Israel having a king who would rule forever, they were ruled by a foreign king; and far from Israel blessing the nations, they were held captive by the nations. And if you had lived through those days you would probably have thought God had abandoned you.

And the same can be true for us, can’t it? You go through stuff, maybe over a period of years, and you face trial or tragedy, things aren’t getting any better, and you think, ‘God, where are you? Because I read your promises that you’ll never leave me or forsake me, but at the moment it sure feels like you have.’

And yet, what Matthew is telling us is that in all these dark days of descent and decline, God’s promises and his purposes were unchanging - that he remained faithful even when Israel didn’t. You see, when God promised David that he would give him a son who would rule forever, he said that however bad things got with David’s descendants, ‘*my steadfast love* will not depart from him’ (2 Sam 7:15). In other words, God’s faithfulness to his promises wasn’t dependent on other people’s performance, but on God’s steadfast, never-ending, never running out love.

And it was when the fulfilment of the promises seemed further away than ever - when Israel was under the boot of Rome, when Herod, an Edomite, was on the throne of David, that Christ came.

And so every year, whatever else comes to mind when you hear the word 'Christmas', it's this yearly reminder that however hopeless things might seem, God is faithful and will not let you down. That as you ponder Christ being born into the darkness and cold of the stable, you can know that however dark and cold life can seem, God will never abandon you, his steadfast love will never let you go, and you can trust him.

But if that's the first thing starting with the genealogy tells us, the second is…

The Greatness of Christ
Look again at how Matthew begins: v1, 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus *Christ*.' And then how he ends it, v16, 'Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called *Christ*.'

Now, you and I can fall into the trap of thinking that Christ was sort of like Jesus' surname, Mr J Christ of Nazareth. But that's not how Matthew means it. Because Christ means Messiah, 'the anointed one'. And today we hear 'Messiah' with religious overtones. But back then you would have heard it with royal overtones, because the anointed one was the king. So when Matthew calls Jesus 'Jesus Christ', he means Jesus Messiah, Jesus the Anointed One, Jesus the king.

And not just any old king, but the ultimate king. Because think how great the king promised to David and to Israel was going to be. Isaiah 9:6-7, 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forever more.' He was going to be a king like no other king!

And, he wasn't going to be a flash-in-the-pan celebrity. You see, by starting with the genealogy, Matthew is pushing you to reckon with the fact that this baby is a king whose coming God had planned from the beginning of time. Listen to how Micah the prophet puts it: 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth *is from of old, from ancient days*… for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.' (Micah 5:2,4). In other words, this wasn't some reactive, last minute decision by God - 'oh things are going bad, better send the Messiah.' This was planned from ancient days.

And the world-wide scale of his reign that Micah hints at, the prophet Zechariah spells out, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.' (Zech 9:9-10). So this king about to be born will be a king like no other, whose coming was planned from the dawn of time, and when he comes he's not going to be some tin-pot dictator, his rule will know no boundary.

And yet, Zechariah isn't just talking about the geographic scale of his reign is he? He's also talking about it's impact. That he will speak peace to the nations, that chariot and warhorse and battle bow - the means of death and destruction - will themselves be destroyed.

And that's what's so extraordinary about this promised king, isn't it? Because it wasn't just Abraham and David who were promised an offspring. Way before David, way before Abraham, at the very beginning, God promised an offspring to woman, a son who would crush the serpent's head. Genesis 3:15, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' And so this king who will come and reign, and rule, he will crush the one responsible for introducing all this death and destruction, and he will put all things right, but he will do so at the cost of himself.

And it's because that's who this promised son of David will be, that when the angel tells the shepherds that 'unto you is born this day in the city of David *a Saviour who is Christ the Lord*' (Luke 2:11), or why when the angel appeared to Mary and told her, that to the boy she bears, 'The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1:32-3) they mean that God's kingdom is about to break in in unimaginable ways - because this long-promised King has come.

So, by beginning with this genealogy, as well as Christmas bringing a reminder of God's faithfulness, Matthew is telling us it brings a challenge. You see, the danger with Christmas is that it can be like when someone brings their baby to church for the first time - and we all gather round and cluck; and say, 'o isn't she beautiful! She's just like her dad!' But this genealogy tells us that Jesus hasn't come to be a perpetual baby, who gets wheeled out once a year for us to goo at. He's the king. And the king who demands our allegiance.

So, as we prepare for Christmas, think about your own heart and life - who will have your allegiance? Which king will you serve? I mean, think of the kings we could serve. We could serve a political king, couldn't we. You could be shaped and molded and critically influenced by some political ideology, or politician - and you see people, or issues, through that lens, rather than through the lens of Christ and his kingdom.

Or, the king who holds sway over your life could be King Fear. You don't have such a problem believing that God is faithful, what you don't believe is that he's powerful. You know he's willing, but you're not convinced he's able. And as a result you worry, you're afraid, of your boss, or some illness, or for your kids' safety, or your future; because you believe that other powers are greater than Christ.

Or maybe the king you give your allegiance to is King Comfort. And doing that which maintains your personal comfort is what determines your decision making, it's what rules your thinking. And you'd never go outside the borders of what's comfortable. Or maybe it's King Pride or King Position - and how you appear, or what you get out of something, or who you are in life, is what governs you.

But Christmas is this yearly reminder that a far greater king has come, who commands our allegiance, who can defeat our fears, who gave up his comfort to rescue us, who humbled himself to save us, who was bruised that we might be healed, and who now sits in glory. And every Christmas brings this call, come, and bow before him.

But thirdly and finally this genealogy reminds us of…

The Grace of Jesus

Now, in your CV, or you resumé, depending on the position you're applying for, there are going to be some things you emphasise, and you put them front and centre, and there are going to be other things that you hide away, or conveniently omit all-together. It all depends on the spin you want to put on your life.

And it's no different with a family tree. If you're trying to make a statement about yourself, there are some family members you're going to be proud to say, 'o yes, I'm descended from so and so.' And there are going to be others, those dodgy relatives you'll deny all knowledge of: 'Uncle Boris? No, I think you must be thinking of someone else.'

And that's the third thing that makes this genealogy so remarkable. Because if Matthew's presenting this baby in the stable as a great king, why include the people he includes, whilst leaving others out? I mean, it makes total sense to headline Abraham and David, but why, in a patriarchal society, does he include 5 women among 40 men? And why these 5 women? Why Tamar in v3, and Rahab and Ruth in v5, and Bathsheba in v6, and Mary in v16? When, frankly, there would have been way classier women he could have included?

Well, the fact that their being there stands out means that Matthew wanted you to ask exactly that question. That every Christmas, as you think of where this baby has come from, you ponder, why them?

Now, on one level, Mary's easy to answer - she was Jesus mother. But take her out and you're left with 4 women, and they're united by two things. Firstly, each of them was a foreigner, a gentile, from a pagan people. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites; Ruth was a Moabite and Bathsheba was married to Uriah, a Hittite. So why include them in the line of the Messiah of Israel, when Matthew could have included the great matriarchs of Israel like Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel - but doesn't? Instead, he chooses to shine a light on these foreigners. Why? To remind us, every Christmas, that Jesus has come for everyone - whatever your nationality. That when the angels told the shepherds this was good news of great joy for *all people*, they weren't joking. That when the Persian magi came and worshipped him, they were just the start. That Jesus truly has come to be a blessing to all nations.

But these 4 women shared something else in common, didn't they? And in that, Mary joins them. Because, in one way or another, all of their reputations were tainted by sexual scandal.

Verse 3, 'and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.' The only problem is that Tamar wasn't just a Canaanite, she was also Judah's daughter-in-law, and she disguised herself as a prostitute so he would sleep with her. And when all the dirt came out in public, Judah was forced to admit that even though she'd done this she had acted more honourably than he. Which sadly says more about his dishonour than her honour, as it ends in an incestuous mess.

But if Tamar pretended to be a prostitute, Rahab was one. And Rahab was a resident of Jericho. And it was she who hid the Israelite spies before Israel invaded the land. And so when Jericho fell to Joshua and his troops, she and her family were spared. And she eventually married an Israelite called Salmon: v5, 'Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab.' And so, incredibly, a Canaanite prostitute became part of the Messiah's family line. And Matthew doesn't hide her away, he shines a spotlight on her.

And Rahab she was the mother, or grandmother - because Matthew may be skipping some generations here, of Boaz. And who does Boaz marry? Verse 5, 'Boaz the father of Obed *by Ruth*' - a Moabite. A member of a pagan, gentile people who owed their existence to the incestuous encounter between Lot, Abraham's nephew, and his eldest daughter. But Ruth turned her back on Moab and made her way to Israel, where she fell in love with Boaz. And though she'd have had no idea of what could happen, this woman, from a people the law said could never be admitted to Israel, became the great-grandmother of David himself.

And when we get to David's entry in the genealogy, what do we read? Verse 6, 'David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba.' Except, that isn't what we read, is it? We read, 'David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' And that wasn't just a sexual, but a murderous scandal. And yet, it's from all the mess and fallout of that relationship, that comes the line that leads to Jesus, and the final woman on the list - Mary.

And where you're expecting to read 'And Jacob the father of Joseph, and Joseph the father of Jesus by Mary, you read instead, v16, 'And Jacob the father of Joseph, *the husband* of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.' And Mary would always carry the social stigma of having become pregnant before her marriage - but not by Joseph.

So why highlight these women? I mean, even in our crazy day, the taint of sexual scandal hardly adds to your resumé, does it? And how much less then? So why them? Because, as Matthew introduces the birth of Jesus, he wants us to know, every year, that not only is this king great, he is gracious. That he has come for people like Matthew, a tax collector and Roman collaborator, and people like Tamar and Rahab, and Ruth and Bathsheba. For people who are guilty - and who everyone else would shun. And instead of shunning them, Jesus comes and says, 'I am not ashamed to have you in my family.'

Now, today, most mums give birth in a nicely scrubbed and clean hospital birthing room, don't they. No mess on the floor, clean sheets, warm and dry towels, attending staff all gowned up; gloves on. Let's just say that wasn't how Jesus came into the world. Jesus was born into the muck and the grime of a stable - and from the muck and the grime of this family tree - because that's the world, those are the people - people like us - he's come to rescue.

And so this genealogy tells you God is faithful and you can trust him; it tells you Christ is great and you should worship him. But it also tells you he is gracious. And you may be stained by sin - we all are - but Christ has come to welcome you into his family, and tell you, I am not ashamed of you, I love you, and I was bruised, I gave my life to bring you back.