The Outsider
Matthew 1:1-6; 2:1; 13-15

When the angel announced the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds, he said, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all the people*." (Luke 2:10) - so the coming of Jesus into history is an event with world-wide implications - that has the power to leave no-one untouched. And yet, as the gospel writers tell us about it, they highlight certain groups of people, and as they do they're telling us: This is good news for all - if they'll hear it; but in particular - it is good news for these. And this Advent we're looking at who it was Christ came for. Last week we saw it was, and is, for the shamed. Today we're going to see how Christ has come for the Outsider.

A Line of Division
A couple of years ago Su and I flew to the US for the first time - into San Francisco. And we have never experienced a queue for passport control like it. It was an experience that left you thinking, they really don't want us in the country. Or at least, they want to make it as hard as possible to get in. Now, in Europe, we've got used to the idea of open borders. Which is why when the borders were shut in the last lockdown it seemed so alien.

But borders exist to make it clear, this is where this country's territory begins. And you're either in or out. You're either a citizen or you're not. You can enter, or you can't.

Well, look at how Matthew begins his gospel and his account of Jesus' birth: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' Because implicit in that introduction is a border, a separating line, not of national territory, but of ethnic origin.

You see, the people of Israel did not appear out of nowhere. They're the descendants of Israel, Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. And from among all the men and women of the ancient world who God could have chosen, God chose Abraham, that from him, God would form his own, special, chosen people. A people - the Jewish people - who would know God, and experience God like no other people group would. Who would have his laws and know his character - his tenderness and his firmness, his righteousness and his grace, his justice and his mercy.

And you were either a descendent of Abraham or you weren't. You were either a member of God's special people, or you were on the other side of the border. An outsider.

Now, many, if not most of you, will have an educational background and a resumé that opens doors for you. Or you'll have a nationality, a passport, that allows you to cross physical borders, and they welcome you. So you probably don't think of yourselves as an outsider.

Until, that is, you start trying to speak French to your neighbour, or make yourself understood to the woman at the Migros checkout. Then you know what it is to be an outsider, to *not* belong.

And Matthew's account of Jesus' birth begins with this reminder: Abraham. *Son of* Abraham. You're either descended from him or you're not. You're either a child of Abraham, or you're not. You're either in or out.

And if you're not Jewish, and I assume most of you aren't, you are, by birth, an outsider. Paul, the archetypal Jewish *insider,* describes people like us as being 'alienated from the commonwealth of

Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (Eph 2:12).

Now, of course a secular person might hear that and say, 'yup, and that's exactly what's wrong with religion. It divides people. It excludes people. It builds walls between people. And we'd be much better off without it. Instead, we should focus on the brotherhood of man, on what unites us.'

And yet, however sympathetic to that you are, you'd have a hard time defending the idea that secularism unites people, wouldn't you? Because to unite people you have to have a common vision of what really matters in life, a meaning for and sense of what makes for human thriving, of what the good life looks like. And secularism simply can't give you that, at least not without trespassing on the grounds of faith and religion, the very thing it says you mustn't do. And our current culture of expressive individualism is hardly going to bring people together, when the whole point is you're an individual and you've got to be you, regardless of anyone else.

And so if the secular person points the finger at the divisiveness of religion, the religious person can point the finger back and say, 'sure but look at the divisions between left and right, conservative and liberal, old and young, haves and have nots.' Secularism has probably never had a stronger hold on Western culture than it has now and we see divisions and borders all around us.

But if Matthew's gospel begins with a reminder of the line of division, it also tells us that from the start, in fact, *through* his choosing of Abraham, God was going to do something extraordinary for Jew and non-Jew. For insider and outsider.

Because, as we saw last week, when Matthew describes Jesus as 'son of Abraham' he's not just nodding to Jesus' Jewish ancestry - 'he's a good Jewish boy'. He's saying that Christ has come in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, that through one of Abraham's offspring, the whole world, insider and outsider, will be blessed.

And the psalms and the prophets picked up on that promise. In the Book of Psalms, Psalm 1 is really an introduction to the whole book, so, in many ways, Psalm 2 is really chapter 1 of Psalms. And Psalm 2 is a song about a great king who will come, to whom the Lord will say, 'you are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make *the nations* your inheritance' (Ps 2:7-8). Just ask of me, Son, and *all* the outsiders, from every nation and people group, will be yours, I'll add them to your people.

And looking into the far-off future, Isaiah the prophet saw how that was going to happen: 'There shall come a shoot from the stump of Jesse [King David's father] and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.' (Is 11:1-2). So Isaiah saw that from the stump, the hacked down, all but destroyed royal line of David, a king would arise. And through him, Isaiah says, 'The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples - of him shall the nations inquire.' (Is 11:9-10). Or, as another translation puts it, 'the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him.' (NLT)

But think of the barriers to becoming Jewish. I mean, around the Roman Empire there were individual gentiles, who converted to Judaism, and became insiders, but they were few. Circumcision, the food laws, sabbath observance and the sheer exclusivity of it, proved a border, a

gulf, too great to cross. So the promise to Abraham, that one would come who would draw the outsiders in, seemed as far away as ever. Until Matthew opens the New Testament and Matthew and tells us, all along God was planning something extraordinary in the line of Messiah.

Crossing the Divide

Now, if, when it came to knowing the promises and grace of God, Israel were insiders and the pagan nations outsiders, there were two pagan people groups in particular who exemplified that. And the first were the Canaanites. The people who inhabited the Promised Land before Israel invaded.

And the pagan gods of the nations were gods of the powerful, of the ruling classes, of the kings. But when God, the God of Israel, liberated his people from slavery in Egypt, and lead them out into freedom, it was a physical demonstration that God hears the cry, not just of the powerful, but of the poor, of the oppressed, of the slave, that this God, the one true God, cares for those the powerful cast aside.

But when God led Israel into the Promised Land, that didn't just show how he provides his oppressed people with a home, it shows how he executes judgment on the wicked. That he wasn't just a God of mercy, but of justice

Because the Canaanites *were* wicked. Whether it was child sacrifice or perverted sexual practices, the Bible tells us that God patiently, mercifully, waited until their sins reached a level when he had to act, and through Israel invading the Promised Land, judgement came.

Now, when an earthquake hits, in the aftermath pictures sometimes appear of a survivor, maybe a sole survivor, being pulled from the rubble. And amidst the destruction of God's judgment, one woman and her family were rescued and pulled from the wreckage: Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute of Jericho. And who appears in Jesus' genealogy? Matthew 1:5, 'and Salmon the father of Boaz *by Rahab*'. She's the ultimate outsider: saved from judgment, brought into the people of God, but not just that, brought into Messiah's line. The line of the king.

And she and Salmon have a son, called Boaz. And look who Boaz marries: 'and Boaz the father of Obed *by Ruth*' (Matt 1:5). Now, if you've grown up with a mum like Rahab, who knew she'd been rescued, no wonder Boaz was open-hearted to Ruth. Because Ruth was from Moab. And if the Canaanites were one people group who exemplified what it was to be outsiders, the Moabites were another. They were so much outsiders that God had said, "No Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever.' (Deut 23:3).

But there was a family from Bethlehem, of all places! And the father's name was Elimelech, and he was married to a woman called Naomi. But when a famine struck they left Bethlehem and moved to Moab. Ironic isn't it? Because if you were listening to the podcast this week, Bethlehem means *House of Bread*, but Elimelech and Naomi have to leave the house of bread, because there was no bread. The larder was bare. And in Moab, first Elimelech and then Naomi's two sons die, leaving Naomi alone with her Moabite daughters-in-law.

So, if Rahab was like one saved from the rubble of an earthquake, for Naomi this is an earthquake that's hit her. She's in a foreign land, and now has no husband and no sons to provide for her. Her

life is in ruins. And yet, it's because of all that pain and sorrow that she moves back to Bethlehem. And Ruth, the Moabitess, insists on going with her. And it's in Bethlehem that Ruth meets and marries Boaz. And Ruth the outsider comes further in than she could ever have known, because the Lord choses her to carry the line of Christ, the King.

But think about Naomi. She lived to see her life improved. She lived to see her daughter-in-law marry well. But she died without ever knowing that underneath all her pain and sorrow God was working out something even more beautiful than she could imagine. That her *leaving* Bethlehem was to see Ruth included *in* Bethlehem. In all that Bethlehem would come to mean. That all her loss was gain, not just for Ruth but for every outsider.

So if, at the moment, you know something of Naomi's loss and sorrow. And you long for God to turn this around. Ruth's story and Naomi's story tell you: he will, in his time, and in ways more beautiful than you can imagine.

But, if Rahab and Ruth were the foreshadowing of what God was up to, the Magi - the wise men - were the first-fruits.

Look at Matthew 2:1, 'Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.' And another Sunday we're going to look more closely at these Magi. But for now, look where they come from - the east. Persia, Iran or Iraq. Racial, ethnic, religious outsiders, and yet here they come - to worship the One born King of the Jews. They're like the first drops of rain before the deluge; the trickle before the flood. Because within 30 or so years, the good news of this King of the Jews will be spreading from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and out to the ends of the earth. And outsiders everywhere are coming in.

And it all begins in Bethlehem. But look how it begins.

Christ The Outsider

In his account, Luke tells us how Mary, 'gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn' (Luke 2:7). And Matthew tells us how Joseph, warned in a dream about Herod's plot to kill Jesus, takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt.

And so, the King of the Jews, the One who should have been the ultimate insider, literally, physically, takes the place of the outsider. He's born outside, and has to flee outside the borders of Israel and becomes a refugee.

But it doesn't end there. As you read the gospels, you get the sense that Jesus was constantly on the move. And that's because he wanted to teach in multiple locations. But it's also clear that the authorities were hunting him, so he can't stay in any one place for long. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests", he said, "but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

And yet, more than anywhere else, it was in his death that Jesus became the outsider. You see, in the Old Testament, if by your behaviour you forfeited the right to be counted a member of God's people, you were exiled from the camp. Sent outside the border; made the outsider you'd chosen to be. And so on the Day of Atonement, all the sins of Israel were confessed upon the head of a

scapegoat. And that goat was then led outside the camp, outside the city, and into the wilderness: a substitute for everyone; because everyone deserved the punishment of the outsider.

But listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says of Jesus. He tells us that Christ 'suffered outside the gate', crucified outside the city walls, as the one 'outside the camp' (Heb 13:12-13). Can you see what he's saying? He's saying that Jesus took the place of the outsider. And at the cross, even God the Father turned away from him, as he cried out, 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?'

Why? Because Jesus took upon himself all those things we think, or say, or do, that put us beyond the border of God's mercy and grace, all those things that make us outsiders - not just by our birth, but by our lives. He bore them all, and paid for them all.

That's why he came; that's why he was born. As Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). He was cast out that we might be brought in, he was excluded that we might be included, he was forsaken that we might be loved. And because of him, like Rahab, we have been pulled from the rubble and saved from judgement. Like Ruth we have been welcomed in, and made family. And like the Magi, we have been led to see and savour Christ the King.

So, the line of this long promised King included the likes of Rahab and Ruth, and he was born an outsider, lived as an outsider, died as an outsider, that you might be brought in. As Paul says, 'But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both [Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility' (Ephesians 2:13-14).

What secular culture and religion cannot do, Christ does. He's torn down the wall of ethnic and racial even political division. He's dug up the border, and united us in himself. Because as Paul says, the true children of Abraham are not those of natural descent, they're those who, like Abraham, believe. Who put their trust in what God has done for them in Jesus, not in their racial, or ethnic, or political pedigree, but in Christ.

So, this Advent, look back to what Jesus has done for you. Every time you see a picture of the Magi, or of the star they followed - any of the thousand illuminated ones hanging from lamp-posts, remember, God has kept his promise to Abraham, to bless the nations, to bring in the outsiders. It started with the Magi, and it's got all the way to you.

Secondly, know that you're not an outsider anymore. Because of Jesus, you're accepted, you're loved by your heavenly Father. And that means you can turn away from the self-righteousness of religion, or the divisiveness of secular culture. Plus you can turn away from the wrong compromises you make trying to fit into whatever circle you're trying to fit into. Instead, you can know, you're accepted in the only circle that ultimately matters - you've crossed the border into God's people. And he loves you as his child.

Thirdly, as you remember how Christ has brought you in from the cold, do that for others. In Romans 15:7, Paul writes, 'Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.' This Advent, see how God's mission to bring in the outsider is your mission - that might mean inviting someone for a meal, or befriending your neighbour, or increasing your giving to missions, or joining the work of

CABES or Port'espoir. The gospel is good news of great joy for all, but it's especially good news for the outsider. Do what you can to bring them in.

But finally, this Advent, be hopeful. Lift up your head. Because at Advent, we don't just look back to Christ's first coming, we look forward to his second. And today that is one day closer than it was yesterday! So look forward with expectation to the day when he will finally and completely break down these diving walls, the day when there will be a great crowd around his throne, filled with outsiders like us - redeemed, revelation tells us, 'from every tribe and tongue and people and nation'.

Abraham was promised it. Rahab and Ruth foreshadowed it. The Magi were the first fruits of it. And you and I get to be part of it. Thank God that we do.