

Jesus the Jew (Matthew 1.1-17)

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Well, I bet you're glad you didn't get *that* reading this morning. Of all passages to read publicly, a genealogy is surely one of the more challenging. Thank you, Sarah, and well done. To be clear, that wasn't the gospel reading set for today but this year the lectionary focusses on the gospel of Matthew and I've wanted to offer a bit of an introduction to the gospel as a whole.

So, have you ever taken much notice of how our four gospels get underway, how they get going? They all acknowledge that in Jesus we're at the beginning of a new phase in God's engagement with the world, of a huge new story, but they each do it in quite different ways.

Mark launches in with great economy and directness: '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God*', he writes, and we're straight into Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah, and then bang, there's Jesus full grown and fully into it. There's no infancy narrative in Mark. By verse 9, Jesus is baptised, and three verses later he's in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. In less than half a chapter, we're into Lent. This gospel starts at pace – '*immediately... immediately... immediately*', it's a recurring word in Mark's opening chapter.

John, the philosopher, takes a more cosmic approach. Here the story of, Jesus is introduced with reference to creation: '*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*' From the beginning, John's

at pains to connect Christ with God's purpose from all eternity. It's a global perspective; John's opening verses are full of big themes – light/darkness, time/eternity, humanity/divinity...

Luke is different again. Less dramatic than Mark; less thematic than John; Luke's start is relaxed and methodical. Luke writes as if corresponding with a friend: *'Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us ... I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.'* Luke gives us detail - about the lead up to Jesus' birth, the birth itself, and what follows, including stories of his childhood and growing years.

But Matthew!! He starts with a long genealogy. To our ears, hardly the catchiest of beginnings. So what's he doing? Why does this matter? Well, for Matthew it seems, the meaning of Jesus was incomprehensible apart from his Jewish context and the long history of God's relationship with Israel. Matthew himself is thought to have been a Jew, writing to a community of Jewish converts. And he signals the connection of Jesus' story with their ancestral story from the very first verse: *'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham.'*

In fact, Matthew isn't the only gospel to include a genealogy, Luke has one in chapter 3. But where Luke begins with Jesus and works back, right back to Adam, Matthew begins with Abraham, works forward, and finishes with Jesus. In other words, while Luke presents Jesus at the apex of the whole human story, Matthew presents him as the *fulfilment* of the history of Israel.

These approaches aren't mutually exclusive – it's just that, for Matthew, Jesus is deliberately portrayed in his Jewish context, as the culmination of God's promise that Abraham would be father of a nation in whom *'all the families of the earth shall be blessed'* (Gen. 12.3). With the appearance of Jesus, Matthew is saying, this divine promise is accomplished.

But wait, there's more!! Yes, folks, it gets even more exciting!! Matthew's genealogy is divided into 3 sets of fourteen generations, though (truth be told) the text itself appears to miscount and has only thirteen in the final set!! Biblical scholar Tom Wright notes that 3 groups of fourteen equates to 6 groups of seven: *'the number seven was and is one of the most powerful symbolic numbers,'* he writes, *'and to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven in the sequence is clearly to be the climax of the whole list. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what Israel has been waiting for two thousand years'* (Wright 2002.3).

Interestingly, the first group of fourteen culminates with King David; the second with the Babylonian exile; and the third, with Jesus. Arranged this way, the genealogy encompasses the highpoint of Israel's history (under David) and its nadir (in exile and destruction). And then, it makes the extraordinary claim that in Jesus the Messiah has come to be with the people. That Jesus is 'Emmanuel', the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah – 'God is with us'.

Another striking observation is that this genealogy includes five women. Traditionally, the genealogies of Israel named only men (e.g. Luke's version) The mention of women is significant. What's more, *these women are all in some sense 'outsiders'* and bore some aura of impropriety; Rahab had been a

prostitute, and Tamar a creative schemer, Ruth was a Moabite, Bathsheba had been swept up in adultery, and Mary was an unmarried mother. None of them conform exactly to 'Christian family values' and yet, each played a significant role in Israel's story. Their presence here testifies that God (though choosing to work with Israel) has always been concerned with more than just Israel, and, what's more, that God readily chooses surprising people to be bearers of divine purpose. They remind us that the coming of Jesus under unlikely circumstances, and his mission to the Gentiles, is not inconsistent with the way God has worked in the past; that there is continuity here, as well as novelty and surprise.

Well, we can perhaps see why for Matthew and these early Jewish converts, it was important to know that following Jesus could be reconciled with faithfulness to their tradition (and not apostasy as some were accusing); that Jesus stood in their tradition as its fulfilment, not its negation. Repeatedly, Matthew's gospel insists that Jesus is the fulfilment of Jewish law, and indeed, Jesus himself expressed this. At his baptism, for example, which we mark today, Jesus is said to respond to John's hesitancy to baptise him by saying, 'Let it be so ... for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness' (3.15).

OK – so we can see this was important for converts from a Jewish background. But what does the 'Jewishness' of Jesus and this gospel mean for us? What does Matthew's insistence on the continuity between Israel, Jesus and the church make available to us? Well, here's a thought.

In the Jewish tradition, the way God is known, the way God works, is deeply connected with everyday life. It shows through in everything – politics,

community and family relationships, practice of hospitality, agriculture, economics, environment. If Jesus is the fulfillment of *this* tradition, then it means there is nothing simply ‘inward’ or abstract about our spiritual journey. God’s salvation is salvation *history*; it’s worked out over time, in particular places and particular lives. In the lives of people, men and women, who have names and make choices for or against God in the details of daily life. Jesus the Jew is Saviour of the bodily, created, corporate, political world. And that had for them, and still has for us, radical implications for what it means to be faithful, to be a disciple, to follow Jesus. It’s a whole body, whole congregation, whole of life commitment.

At one level, this might seem a familiar point. But actually, it’s extraordinary. The gospel proclaims that the God of Israel has come among us all in the person of Jesus, seeking to transform ordinary, embodied life into a way of justice, mercy and peace. And that this God is faithful; through all the vicissitudes of history, God’s purpose, God’s will to reconcile, redeem, make whole, remains true. As Matthew, in this genealogy, brings to our remembrance the whole of our tradition’s story and experience of God, may we discover anew how our faithfulness to *this* God, in *this* generation, might participate in God’s healing of the world.

References

Carter, W (2001) *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA.

Wright, T (2002) *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*, SPCK, London.