

## **“FOLLOWING THE KING – 2: BACK TO THE BEGINNING”**

### ***Matthew 1:1-17***

Now, you may be thinking that that's a rather strange reading to have had this morning. OK, so we're looking at Matthew's Gospel on these Sunday mornings, but did we really need to read that. It's not a chunk of doctrine, nor a bit of narrative, nor poetry. It's just a list of names – one of those lists of names that is so often used in parodies of church services in comedy shows (although the NIV doesn't have all the “*begats*”, fortunately!). Fair enough, it mentions Jesus right at the end, and it includes the names of some people we may recognise from occasional forays into the Old Testament. But what's it there for?

Well, some lists of names can be quite interesting in their own right sometimes. Think of things like *The Book of Lists* or the kind of trivia quizzes that are popular with many people. You might read through a list and try to imagine what the people were all like. You can look at the names and wonder what they mean. There are all kinds of permutations involved. When I was at university, the hall in which I was living was at the end of a lane in Englefield Green, right next to the Air Forces Memorial. It was a large memorial set on a hill overlooking the Thames at Runnymede, from the top of which you could look out all over London. But the walls of the memorial were covered with the names of all the Allied airmen who had died during the Second World War and had no known grave. There was a curious interest in just reading through the names and trying to imagine what these people were like, how they'd died, whether their families ever came there. It's a bit like the new Armed Forces Memorial at Alrewas, I suppose..

There are other people who find great interest in following such lists of names as these as they try to trace their family history. They write letters and travel all over the country – all over the world – seeking out their ancestors' names on gravestones, parish registers, lists of criminals and so on. With the advent of the Internet, there is a huge amount of material available there as well. And the Mormon Church gets involved in all this so that they can retrospectively baptise people who may have missed out while they were alive.

But this family tree here in *Matthew 1* is a bit different. This is the family tree of Jesus the Messiah, who is introduced in v1 with the impressive title “*son of David, son of Abraham*”. Many of the great figures of the Old Testament are included as well – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Josiah. It's a list of the great and the good – but a list with some other curious inclusions as well. Why is it here? What's Matthew's reasons for including it – for actually starting the book with it? Well, we gave a partial answer to that last week when we were looking at a kind of overview of Matthew's life of Jesus, so bear that in mind as we think about it this morning.

Genealogies were important to the Jewish people. If you read through the historical books of the Old Testament – the Jewish scriptures, if you like – you'll find an awful lot of these lists of names. And even in the New Testament, many Jewish figures are identified by including their father's name. As we said last week, Matthew was writing this Gospel for a readership that was mainly Jewish, Jewish people who had started to follow the way of Jesus, but were a little anxious about whether that meant they were betraying their heritage and how being a Christian fitted in with being Jewish. (That's why there are so many quotations from and references to the words of the Jewish prophets and preacher, and why Matthew seems to stress the ways in which Jesus kept to much of the Jewish tradition.) His first concern, then, is to show that Jesus is from good kosher stock. He can trace his descent back to Abraham – which, actually, pretty well every Jew could. But, more than that, Matthew places Jesus firmly in line with the history of Old Testament Israel. Here, from a line which includes most of the great names of Hebrew history, is the Christ, the Messiah. This is God's unfolding plan of salvation – which for the Jews seemed to kick off with God's covenant with Abraham – and Jesus is the climax of it.

And the way Matthew sets out his list (remember we said last week how well planned this Gospel is), with three groups of fourteen generations – although he has left out a few names to make it fit – seems to suggest that the time is right: a special person is about to arrive. And the list is arranged according to the

three great periods of Jewish history – Abraham to David, David to the Exile and the Exile to the present (for them). This is Matthew’s way of saying, “Look – it all adds up. Now is the right time!”

And the one who is to come – the Messiah, the Christ – is someone who is of kingly descent. The second group of names are all kings of Israel. He is also directly in line from King David. Now the mathematicians among you may well have worked out that if every person between David and Jesus produced only two offspring (a conservative estimate for Jewish families), there could have been well over 120,000,000 people who could claim their descent from David! Nonetheless, it was important for the Jews and important for Matthew to stress the line. Matthew is going on to tell the story of a man who has come as King, as the inaugurator of God’s kingdom, and who fulfils so much of the prophecy about the Son of David. This is a sparkling pedigree.

And yet ... There are one or two names in the list which aren’t quite what you might expect from such a pedigree – an early hint that what Matthew has to say has relevance far, far beyond the Jewish nation. Amongst all these wonderful men who are more or less synonymous with the heritage of Israel are four women who are mentioned – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba (“*Uriah’s wife*” v6). Fair enough – some of the women should perhaps be given credit for the furtherance of the line. After all, they had to produce the men. But why on earth these four? They’re not exactly the cream of Jewish womanhood.

In fact, none of these women is even a Jew. They are four outsiders that Matthew has edited into his list. Tamar was a Canaanite woman. Rahab was from Jericho and obviously not born a Jew. Ruth was a Moabite woman. And Bathsheba was married to Uriah the Hittite, so even if she was actually born a Jew, she became a Hittite on her marriage to Uriah. It’s a curious choice of names to include. There’s no mention of Sarah or Rachel or any other of the mothers of the Jewish Hall of Fame.

And to pile it on even thicker, Matthew has chosen women whose lives were blighted by sexual impropriety. I won’t go into all of it now, but just give you an outline, in case you’re not familiar with their stories. You can read about Tamar in *Genesis 38:11-14*. She actually seduced her father-in-law, Judah, disguising herself so he thought she was a prostitute. Judah, of course, didn’t exactly cover himself in glory in this episode, either! Rahab seems to have made a living for herself in Jericho as a prostitute. Bathsheba is known almost exclusively as the woman who had an adulterous affair with King David, leading to the murder of her husband. Ruth seems to be the only one without a blot on her character. That is, until you realise that the Jews considered the Moabites to be the descendants of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter (which you can read about in *Genesis 19:30-37*) and they were barred from entry into the assembly of God’s people according to *Deuteronomy 23:3*. So again, we ask ourselves why on earth Matthew saw fit to include these people – outsiders and blatant sinners – into the story of Jesus’ descent.

Well, let me briefly suggest four reasons why such a list as this – which, on the face of it, has plenty of good reasons to be part of a book about God’s salvation – should include these four women – who, on the face of it, don’t have any obvious reason for inclusion.

Firstly, from a Jewish point of view, the next section of Matthew’s Gospel was likely to be a bit of a shock. This Messiah, the Christ, who had been so long predicted and so eagerly awaited by the Jewish people, was not going to arrive in a blaze of glory ready to lead his people triumphantly to victory over their earthly oppressors. He was going to be born to an unmarried mother from an obscure background. What better way to prepare his readers for that than to include references to similarly improper goings-on in the line of the royal house of Israel. It doesn’t by any means condone what went on in the past, but it does remind them that it’s happened before. As Dick France says in his book about Matthew: “*They form an impressive precedent for Jesus’ birth to an unmarried mother from an obscure background*”.

Yet there must be more to it than that. It’s not just to prepare Jewish readers for a bit of a shock in the next chapter. There was also the need to stress certain things about Jesus because, even so soon after his death and resurrection as the time Matthew wrote this Gospel, there were heresies growing up about Jesus

and his life. Only about twenty years after Jesus' return to heaven, there were those who were trying to suggest that Jesus was not fully human *and* fully divine. Some were saying that Jesus was just a man and that all the reports of the events surrounding his death and resurrection were just a hoax. That suggestion could easily be scotched by the many people who, like Matthew himself, were still alive and had witnessed the events with their own eyes. But there were others, though, who were teaching that Jesus wasn't really human at all, and Matthew is attempting here to show that Jesus was, indeed, a human being with a proper genealogy and a clear line of descent. In fact, his descent was so human that it included several people who were anything but divine! It's a proof, for those who needed it, that Jesus was not only fully God, but also a real human being with a real human ancestry.

Now, those two reasons for including the genealogy and for putting these four women into it anticipate the objections of particular groups of people. But The Bible is a book that has something to say to all men and women of all times and generations and races – not just first-century Jewish people. So there are two other reasons I'd suggest as to why Matthew as inspired by the Holy Spirit to put this into his gospel. Here is a great reminder of God's providence in bringing to fruition his plan of salvation for all humanity. If you look back through the Old Testament, you'll see that God's purposes were never to be thwarted by barren women, ageing parents, infanticidal despots, difficult circumstances and so on. And here we see, at a glance, with Matthew's sweep through the history of God's people, that God would use every means necessary to achieve his goal of bringing a Saviour into the world. In order to save the world he had made and which he loved so much, God made use of those very sinners whom he had come to save. Salvation for all men and women, of all races and nations, is made possible through Jesus, whose descent is traced through men and women, through Jews and non-Jews.

And that leads us on to the final lesson we can take from Matthew's list. Those four women were all vindicated by God's blessing in their lives. Sinners they may have been (as, indeed, we all are), but God was able to show mercy to them in his plan for the salvation of the world, his plan to usher in his kingly rule through the long-awaited Messiah. We are all sinners – The Bible makes no bones about that: all the men in this list were sinners, too – but God still shows us his mercy and gives us the opportunity of participating in his purposes for the world. We can know forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God and Son of David. And we too can help in making known the possibility of salvation to those around as we show glimpses of the Kingdom of God in our own lives.

Whatever our background, whatever our nationality or our gender, whatever we may have done in the past that could cut us off from God, we can know his forgiveness and we can be used by him to further his purposes in this world. Jesus' coming had universal appeal – and the message of the Gospel still does. May we be able to follow in the steps of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba as we make known the Christ – Jesus the King, Son of God and Son of David.

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This helps to prepare readers for the surprise of Jesus' birth to an unmarried woman. It stresses that Jesus was fully human as well as divine (against some of the heresies which were starting to appear). It is a great reminder of God's providence in bringing to fruition his plan of salvation for all humanity. And these four women were all vindicated by God's blessing in their lives – a reminder that God still shows us his mercy and gives us the opportunity of participating in his purposes for the world.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Have you ever read through this genealogy before? What's your first impression? Do you recognise any of the names?
2. What is your response to people who claim that Jesus was not fully human or that he didn't even exist?
3. In what ways do you think Jesus is the culmination of God's plan for the world?
4. Why do you think God uses people such as Rahab, Ruth, Tamar and Bathsheba in his plan? Is that an encouragement for you or a disappointment?
5. Matthew has left out some names from his list to make it fit his pattern of three groups of fourteen. Does that matter? Why/why not?