

Matthew 1:1-17, Sermon at St Paul's Banbury Advent 3, 13.12.20

Introduction

There are 47 different names in our passage this morning. So, I've got 47 different points in this sermon. Shall we start at the top? Who's the first name? Yes, verse 2, *Abraham*. Abraham, or Abram as he was first known, lived around 2000 BC. His wife was called Sarah. He was born in a place called Ur. That's in Mesopotamia. Isn't that interesting? I'm so glad we have 46 more names to go...!

Don't worry. We're not going to do that. And that's because Matthew 1:1-17 is more than just a list of names. This list (or, *genealogy*) is far more than a recording of kind of unnecessary bare facts. In fact, what this list of names represents is a drama. It's a drama telling the *story* of God's faithfulness through the complicated and chequered history of Israel. And it's the story of how a God-directed chain of events, through the lives of all these people, is only really the prelude to the final and climatic act, bringing one person onto centre stage: Jesus Christ.

So, as we read this, have that in mind. Like any drama, it's meant to *move* and shape us in some way. Matthew 1:1-17 is not just background information. It's the retelling of God's plan and activity through real people and real families, in real times and real places. And, hopefully, as we'll see shortly, it carries a real message, real implications, and real hope for each one of us.

Reading: Matthew 1:1-17

As we've just read, a great number of characters pop-up through this drama, each one taking the story forward. But instead of focussing in on each individual account, the plan this morning is to zoom out and look at how the larger plot unfolds – a bit like a play in 4 movements, or acts. Each of the 4 acts focusses on a significant moment in salvation history. Let's begin with the first act...

Act 1 - Abraham: A Covenant of Grace is Established (Matthew 1:2-6a)

Abraham is a highly significant figure in salvation history. Way back in Gen 12 (and also Gen 15), God revealed himself and made some huge promises to Abraham. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation – an enormous community of people, who'd live and worship in a special place. Abraham's name would be great. And the Lord would bless him.

But not just Abraham; through Abraham, God would bring blessing to others down the ages too. The Lord said to him:

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you (Gen 17:7).

Abraham would have millions of descendants, like stars in the sky. And the Lord would be God to all of them. In other words, God established a covenant – a solemn, binding agreement – in which he promised to bless and give himself to a chosen people. It was a covenant established *by God* – not dreamed up by people – given for no reason except his sheer goodness. In response, Abraham and the people were simply required to accept this believingly, and to live by faith and obedience to God.

And, so, when they laid hold of that promise by faith, and followed the gracious word of the Lord, they received the temporal and spiritual blessings God promised them. For example, as the song said:

*He said the sons of Abraham
Would be more than the grains of sand
And so, his family grew
Underneath the Pharaoh's rule*

Those things were signs of God's goodness and his faithful promise-keeping.

Sadly, as time went on, this family were not always faithful to God. We see something of that even in this genealogy:

- Like the mention of the twins Perez and Zerah (1:3), who were conceived in a shameful way involving Judah and his daughter-in-law;
- Like David, who murdered Uriah and took his wife (mentioned in 1:6);
- Like Jehoram, in 1:8, who was an evil king;
- Like Manasseh, another king, who set up pagan altars in the temple area, and even sacrificed his own son to idols. He practiced sorcery and refused to listen to the Lord's prophets.

It's a pretty grim family tree in many ways. Yet, the line did not die out. It went on and on, from generation to generation. Instead of starting afresh, the Lord kept this family going – preserving them and blessing in the ways he promised, and in ways the people did not deserve. The question is, why?

Because, *God*. Because, as we sang, *God always keeps his promises*. Because the Lord is faithful to the covenant he established. Despite, the unfaithfulness of the people, he never lies or goes back on his word. When God promises something, he always goes through with it. Isn't that a good thing? That God doesn't forget or change his mind like us. He is always faithful. That is who he is.

And so that seed of promise given to Abraham grew and grew – through all the ups and downs and sins of the people... it kept going all the way down the list... right to the end - to this final name: *Jesus*.

But I wonder if that puzzles you. Why would Jesus' name appear in this family tree rife with sin and unfaithfulness and covenant breakers?

One of our girls recently had to make a family tree for a school project. Thankfully, there weren't any shocking surprises for us. But imagine she went back to her teacher after completing the project, saying,

“Miss! Guess what? I've discovered that I am descended from Ivan the Terrible! Isn't that cool?”

I'm not so sure it would be cool! Yet Jesus' family tree includes people like that. And that is no accident. The covenant that God established with Abraham was always meant to come to fruition through this line, and in *this* son of Abraham.

Jesus is *the* faithful one, who was sent into this very family in order to save and redeem them. To put it another way, the family Jesus came *from* shows us who he came *for*. In fact, that's why he's called Jesus. Just glancing onto verse 21, the angel of the Lord says to Joseph:

*... you are to give him the name Jesus – which means, the LORD saves.
... because he will save his people from their sins.*

However, this promise isn't just given to those from among Abraham's biological descendants. The scope of this covenant is even more extensive. Because God also promised Abraham that through his family line, the Lord would bring blessing to “all peoples on earth” (Gen 12:3) – to those beyond Israel.

Indeed, that's what the apostle Paul says in Galatians 3:8. He says that when God promised that all nations would be blessed through Abraham back in Genesis 12, he was announcing the *gospel* in advance. That's

why it's called a Covenant of Grace. The Covenant of Grace is about God saving a people to himself through Jesus Christ, and through Jesus' faithful work in life and in death - a people that includes Abraham (who trusted in the promise) and includes you and me in Christ. Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15).

Act 2 - David: A Covenant King is Promised (Matthew 1:6b-11)

We've already mentioned how David wasn't always the most pleasant of characters. And, yet, because of the LORD's gracious, covenant commitment to his people, some pretty astounding promises were given to David, the King of Israel, too. The LORD promised David a kingdom and dynasty that would last "for ever" (2 Sam 7:13). Now, that's quite some promise. 'For ever' is a very long time! Even by the British monarchy's standards.

But there's a problem. Because when we read through this list of kings in verses 6-11, what we see is that the kingdom of Israel didn't go on and on. Under David, and Solomon especially, it was pretty spectacular. Yet, according to the Scriptures, the monarchy only lasted for a good four centuries.

That's not "for ever..." Many of these kings disobeyed God's commands. They were covenant breakers. And so were the people under them. As a result, the kingdom was split in two. And the line of kings only lasted until the temple and monarchy were destroyed by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, and the people were taken off into exile to Babylon.

And yet... that's not the end of the story. Because God *always keeps his promises*. Despite the destruction of the kingdom, and a long period of exile, another son of David shows up at the end of the list. And what's the title he's given? *Messiah*. It means Anointed One. In the ancient world, 'messiah' was actually quite a common title for kings and rulers. Yet, here in this list, among all these kings, it's a title reserved for only one in David's line.

Jesus is *the* Messiah. He is the long-awaited, promised King, who alone is qualified to rule on the throne promised to David forever. He's *the* Covenant King, who came to deliver his people from the dominion of darkness, and sin, and death. And to bring them into the Kingdom of light. But, not by the sword. Rather, Jesus, the Messiah, triumphs through the shedding of his own blood on behalf of his people. By his descent to the realm of the dead.

By his victory over death at the resurrection. And by his ascension into heaven, where he sits rightfully on the throne. That's how he establishes his Kingdom.

Wonderfully, if you belong to Christ – that's where you belong too. In his kingdom. Because *the* covenant king is *our* covenant King. Jesus is head of *our* family tree. We are *his* people. We share in the reign of the one whose kingdom will never end.

Act 3 - Exile: A Season of Waiting is Endured (Matthew 1:12-16)

Today marks the 3rd Sunday of Advent in the church's calendar.

Despite the bright lights and consumerism that many associate with this time, Advent is meant to be a season of darkness and waiting. It does anticipate the dawn of a new age, ushered in by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. But Advent is also realistic about our current experience – of disorder, disorientation, and even death.

In many ways Advent mirrors the experience of God's people in exile in Babylon. You see, the Exile was a sign of judgement on Israel for their unfaithfulness to the Lord. It was a terrible tragedy. And a kind of death. The temple, their means of fellowship with God, was destroyed and taken away.

But, like Advent, the story of the exile is not just a tragic story. It's also a story of hope and redemption, as the people anticipate the Lord's promised return and salvation. God had not forgotten his promises to the people. In fact, the time of exile provided another God-ordained occasion for God to display his unparalleled faithfulness and to minister to his people.

One way God did that was through prophets like Ezekiel, who was taken off into captivity with the people. Ezekiel was sent to announce that the exile was an act of God's judgement on account of the people's covenant unfaithfulness. But Ezekiel was also instructed to reiterate the LORD's covenant promises, which had not come to an end. So he prophesied about renewal, restoration, return, and resurrection.¹

Just listen to this promise from the Lord, through his prophet Ezekiel, to his people in exile:

²⁵ [The people] will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. ²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever. ' (Ezekiel 37:25-28)

It's a wonderful promise. Yet, when the people did eventually return to the land - as you may remember from our series in Haggai (right at the beginning of the lockdown in March) - it wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. It just wasn't the same.

So, did the Lord fail? No. Because *God always keeps his promises*. Their return to the land was simply another *sign*, but not the complete fulfilment, of the Lord's promise to dwell permanently with his people. That would come with the arrival of Jesus Christ. Who is not only the Son of Abraham... and the Son of David... But is also the Son of God. Matthew 1:23:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').

After darkness, there is light. God has come and God is with us in Christ. And God will restore us to him when Christ comes again. Continue to hold fast to that in this season of waiting. His faithful promises will help us endure to the end.

Act 4 - Jesus: The Messiah has Come! (Matthew 1:1, 17)

I hope it's been helpful to see how Israel's story is Jesus' story. All the strands come together in him. Yet, Jesus' story doesn't conclude at verse 17. This is just page 1 of the New Testament! It's just the beginning of his reign. And, you know, we ourselves are a testimony of that. As those who've been drawn into Jesus' kingdom from all nations of the earth, we are confirmation that *God always keeps his promises*.

That is such a wonderful privilege. Israel's story is Jesus' story ... is our story too. So, we're not just the audience of this drama. We're part of it. Just as God was committed to his covenant promises to Abraham, David, and the remnant in exile, so he is eternally committed to you and me in Christ.

This month will continue to be difficult for all of us. Perhaps especially for those who live on their own. Be assured – God has not forgotten you. God is so committed to you, that he even gives us the assurance of his love and faithfulness in the form of a seemingly unnecessary genealogy! May we continue to hold-on and hold-out to the hope of this story during this Advent and Christmas. *Amen*.

¹ James Robson, The Proclamation Bible, 882.