

Matthew 1: 1-17

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1.

In Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the hero is asked about his family background and then forced to confess that he lost both his parents. As it turns out, Earnest himself had been found in a handbag when he was a baby. The indignation that greets this revelation is one of the more famous and funniest moments of the play. One listener responds to Earnest's extraordinary tale about what may or may not have happened to his mother and father with the comment, 'To lose one parent may be regarded as misfortune. To lose both looks like carelessness'.

2.

The point, of course, is that family pedigree is regarded in some circles as a sign of status. That is the information Earnest's inquisitors are digging for. And that's an opening to understanding what's going on at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. Anyone who decides to read the New Testament will find, on turning to its very first page, a collection of people with names like Aminadab, Zerubbabel and Rehoboam. As challenging as those names are for us today, they are in fact part of a profoundly important passage. This was brought home to me when I heard a New Testament specialist describe this genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew as one of the most moving portions of the entire Bible. 'Taking time to understand this passage is time well spent', he said. 'Because it teaches that out of our best can, sadly, come the worst; and yet out of our (seemingly) worst can come the best'.

3.

In the Jewish world of Matthew's day, this genealogy was the equivalent of a roll of drums, or a fanfare of trumpets. And all those first listeners would find this particular family tree compelling. Like a great procession coming down the street, the famous names go marching by. Matthew begins with Abraham, which is where all Jewish ancestry begins. But the procession then moves through King David, King Solomon, and all the other Kings of Judah, which is very rare. Herod the Great, for example, old Herod whom we will soon meet as we move through to Christmas, had no royal blood. He was no more than a despot whom the Romans made their King in order to further their own Middle East agenda. To Herod, a list of royal names associated with Jesus was a threat. You would not want Herod's spies to over-hear you boasting that you were part of Israel's true royal family.

4.

But of course all eyes would be fixed on who will come at the end of the procession – the position of greatest honour – which is where we find Jesus. And to emphasise that Jesus isn't just another member but is the goal of the whole family line, Matthew arranges the genealogy into groups of seven. This is more than a mathematical curiosity. The number seven was one of the most powerful symbolic numbers for Jews. And so to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven in this sequence, which is where we find Jesus, is clearly to be named as the brightest star of the whole bunch.

5.

Matthew's careful selection of the names, and his grouping them in sevens, reveal that his aim is to make a theological statement, not an historical one. Looking back from the stand point of the end of Jesus' life toward its beginning, Matthew says to his readers: This birth is what Israel had

been waiting on for two thousand years. This is the moment that all these great characters of history have been pointing toward. And thus we read in the last few lines of the genealogy, 'Eleazar [was] the father of Matthan, and Matthan [was] the father of Jacob, and Jacob [was] the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.'

The Christmas hymn 'O Little town of Bethlehem' has a wonderful and naïve simplicity about its words. They capture well the spirit of what Matthew's genealogy is preparing us for:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see you lie.
Above your deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by:
Yet in your dark streets shining the everlasting light
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.

6.

Matthew's Gospel stands at the front door of the New Testament and millions of people have read this genealogy at the beginning of their own exploration about who Jesus was, and who he is. If we understand the passage well, we grasp something of the essence of the whole Gospel story. And that brings me to the last and, I think, most important thing to say about this list of the forebears of Jesus: They are not all Kings and nobles and people of 'righteousness'. Immediately following the genealogy, Matthew will tell the story of how Mary (a girl from Galilee nowhere near the centre of power) fell pregnant while she was not married; and Matthew will ask his readers to have faith that this was the work of God. That is a big ask, and he knows it will need backing up. So, to help his first century readers, and us, to accept that this Messiah could be conceived in an unmarried peasant girl, Matthew adds to his list a few reminders about the surprising ways that God has already worked in this royal line.

7.

Judah is on the list, for example. He treated his daughter-in-law Tamar as a prostitute. Boaz is also there – Boaz being the son of the Jericho prostitute, Rahab. And though David is lauded as the great King, we also remember that he was an adulterer who had the husband of his mistress killed, in order that he might marry her. These are not people or events that we address often on a Sunday morning, but we know that Matthew has included them for a reason. Jesus of Nazareth is the one in whom the 'hopes and fear of all the years' are met. However, even more remarkable than that, we are reminded at the start of his story that out of the seemingly least and humblest, as well as the brightest and important, can come the very best of humanity. In fact, it was through the people we tend to rank as the lowest that God worked God's colourful grace in ways even more bright than in those the world ranks as best.

8.

The son of God was conceived within an unmarried peasant girl, probably no more than 15 years old. Perhaps God still works in similarly unexpected ways today. Whatever the case, we may be assured that whether we feel at our best or at our worst, Advent reminds us that we may all play a part in welcoming – and furthering - the reign of God.