

Matthew 1: 18-25

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Have you ever watched the TV program *Who do you think you are?* In each episode, a well-known person is guided on a genealogical search, looking at their ancestry. Inevitably they discover things they didn't know, sometimes good, sometimes embarrassing. I remember one woman being astonished and not a little ashamed to discover a forebear who was a pirate.

If we dig far enough, go back long enough, I suspect we'd all find forebears who did things we'd rather not be heirs to. This is true for even the best of us ... like Joseph.

This year, we are reading Matthew's gospel which begins with these words:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham ... except it's not. The genealogy ends with

Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born ...

This is Joseph's genealogy, not Jesus'. In Matthew's gospel, the story of the birth of Jesus is Joseph's story and it begins with his genealogy.

This genealogy has some very odd features. Normally, a biblical genealogy is patrilineal – father to son, no women mentioned. But when Joseph's forefathers are listed, four of their mothers are included:

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar;

Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab;

Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth;

David ... the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.

Now, if Joseph were reciting his genealogy, I am sure he would not have mentioned these women, not just because women didn't belong in a genealogy, but because the stories of these particular women are, well, awkward, to say the least. This genealogy contains a soap opera that would make the writers of *Neighbours* blush.

The genealogy begins with Abraham, father of Isaac, father of Jacob, father of Judah and his brothers. You remember them – the ones who sold their sibling Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

Judah had three sons. The eldest married Tamar but died without children. According to the laws of the day, Tamar's brother-in-law was bound to marry her which Judah's second son did. He too died without issue. Judah was worried about his third son so prevented him marrying Tamar. Judah's action shamed Tamar. She took matters into her own hands, disguised herself as a prostitute, seduced Judah, fell pregnant by him and, when she was accused of adultery, produced evidence of the identity of the child's father! A strong, brave woman, who would not let a powerful man destroy her life. Tamar bore twin boys, Perez and Zerah, and they are in Joseph's family tree.

The next woman listed is Rahab. She was the prostitute of Jericho who protected the men whom Joshua sent to spy out the land. Rahab and her family were adopted by the Israelites. According to Matthew's genealogy, she had a child by one of them. We don't know whether Rahab conceived while practising her profession or whether she had married the father.

Rahab's child, Boaz, married Ruth, another widow. She too was a foreigner, but not just any foreigner. Ruth was a Moabite. According to the Torah, the law of Moses, foreigners could be incorporated into the people of Israel, with one exception: Moabites. Why? Two reasons. First, the Moabites were the descendants of Lot, conceived through incest. Secondly, when the people of Israel were wandering in the desert, Moabites convinced them to worship false gods. Plague was the consequence. In the eyes of the Israelites, Moabites were the result of sexual immorality and the cause of idolatry, illness and death.

Yet here we have Ruth, a Moabite, marrying Boaz. How does she manage to do this? By climbing into his bed while he sleeps and lying down on his private parts! Did I mention this was a soap opera?

Finally, there is Bathsheba, identified only by her husbands, perhaps to protect her for she was complicit in adultery. Not just any adultery: Bathsheba bathed naked in full sight of King David who raped her and then had her husband murdered so he could marry her.

The author of Matthew's gospel goes out of his way to include women in Joseph's genealogy, women whose sexual history includes incest, prostitution, seduction and rape. And then, having shocked us to the core, he jumps into the story of the birth of Jesus.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

This first chapter of Matthew's gospel is about Joseph, but it is also written for Joseph. Those words – 'she was found to be with child' – would have shocked and hurt him. The explanation – 'from the Holy Spirit' – must have sounded like a lame excuse, a cover-up. You can hear his reaction: 'Yeah, really. How naive do you think I am?'

But the statement of Mary's pregnancy is preceded by the genealogy. It's there not for us, the readers, but for Joseph, to remind him who he is – the result of very questionable sexual relations. It's as if God is saying to Joseph, 'Don't judge Mary too harshly. Remember who you are and how you came to be.'

So Joseph, conscious of his foremothers and their dubious behaviour, decides to 'dismiss Mary quietly', rather than demand stoning which was his right. Then, he dreams of an angel telling him of the truth of those unbelievable words.

Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus is very different to Luke's. There are no shepherds or angelic chorus here, no full inn or babe in a manger, just a righteous, loving man willing to obey God even when that seems ludicrous.

In these few verses, we meet a real person, gentle, compassionate, wanting to do what is right, willing to take a shamed woman as his wife, willing to raise the coming baby as his own. Joseph, descendant of all those 'begats' and four dubious women, Joseph son of David is, above all else, the man who raised the Messiah.

Think about it. One of the first words a child says, in any language, is the word for Dada, Papa, Abba. When Jesus uttered his first words, he said 'Abba' when he looked at Joseph. There must have been something about Joseph, in his fathering, that allowed Jesus to grow up to teach us to call God 'Abba, Father'.

This fourth Sunday in Advent usually celebrates Mary, mother of our Lord, the first disciple. We've already sung her great song, the Magnificat. We will shortly sing another hymn about her willingness to risk her life in saying 'yes' to God. But in Matthew's year, this Sunday is also Joseph's day in Advent. If Mary is the first disciple, then surely Joseph is the second.

Joseph disappears from the gospel story early. Mary and Jesus' siblings are there, but not Joseph. The Church has always understood that he died sometime before Jesus began his active ministry.

There is another tradition of the Church, one I lived with for 15 years as I wrote my thesis, the harrowing of hell. This is the belief that, as Jesus rose from the dead, he was accompanied by all the righteous who had died before his resurrection. Somehow, in all those years of reflecting on the harrowing, I never thought of Joseph being part of that great crowd ... until Thursday, when I was writing this sermon. I suddenly had an image of Joseph carrying a small Jesus in his arms, and then Jesus, rising from the dead, carrying Joseph into heaven, and I wrote this poem. It's called, *Anastasis*¹.

Alone. Inert. Silent. Dead.
 Earth quakes,
 hell's darkness pierced by heaven's light,
 silence shattered by the Almighty's shout.
 He stirs, awakens, bursts forth in joy,
 then stops, turns, searches the multitude,
 seeking one who held him in his arms,
 bound up grazed knees,
 told him dad jokes.
 Adam, Eve, David ...
 There! the old, familiar face,
 hopeful, but uncertain.
 Jesus moves through the crowd,
 gathers Joseph in his arms.
 'Come Dad, I'll take you to our Father.'

Amen.

Note: The poem above is not to be reproduced, used or quoted without the permission of the author, in writing.

¹ *Anastasis* means Resurrection. It is the title of the icon commonly referred to as the harrowing of hell.