

Christmas and Family

Matthew 1:1-17

I heard a story recently from someone from St Mark's who was visiting another church while away for Christmas with her family last year. Apparently the minister ended his sermon with the heart-warming conclusion: *And so Christmas is not about what is under the tree; Christmas is about the people around the tree.*

I suspect that is the view of most people today. We watched Home Alone with some of the ALIVE kids the other day and even that movie makes the same basic point: Christmas is all about families. We buy our gifts and we fuss over the food, and we enjoy the summer holidays. But what resonates most deeply with us is that Christmas is a time for family. The deepest joy of Christmastime is precious time with those we love.

Now, you might be expecting me to say now: that that is all wrong! You've probably heard a Christian preacher say before, with not a little indignation: Christmas is not about the presents, it's not about food, it's not even about family: CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT JESUS!

But I'm not going to do that today. Well, I am going to tell you Christmas is about Jesus! But it's *because* Christmas is about Jesus that Christmas *is* about family. Our instincts about Christmas and family are right and true, just maybe in a different way to what we expect.

After all, when Matthew sets out to write the Christmas story in his gospel, he begins with a family tree. So our plan for this morning is to consider how Matthew's long list of names teaches us about two families: The human family, and the divine family. And we'll see what all this has to do with Christmas

I grant you that at first glance this passage might seem as dry as the Sahara, but I hope you will see it is actually hill-country rich with gold. And as we dig around in this genealogy we will find ourselves taken to the very heart of Christmas, indeed to the very gospel itself.

1. The Human Family

So let's begin with the human family. And of course this is what Matthew's family tree is. The family history of real people who lived in real places in the real world. Specifically this is the family of Israel; The descendants of Abraham.

And this family is a family full of sinners, and sufferers and strangers. This in itself is very surprising. A little ancient history is helpful here. For genealogies were very common in the ancient world. The Greeks and Babylonians, for example, composed lists very similar to these. And it's not like [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) or something like that today where the main aim is to get a record of your family as far back as you can go. Accuracy wasn't much of a concern. Rather, the point of a name list was to establish the prestige of your family. So kings would trace their line back through pure, powerful, and prominent men, often going back to one of the gods.

But the Bible's name lists are very different. They use the same form of literature but they turned the whole enterprise on its head. For Matthew is at pains to show us that this human family is not at all prestigious.

- *Sinners*

So this human family is far from pure. It is a list of sinners. A fly-by-glance at the deep failings of the men in this family will suffice.

Abraham twice disowned his wife. Lying to protect himself and placing Sarah in great danger.

Judah was the ringleader in sending his brother into slavery. He deceived and neglected Tamar, driving her to desperate lengths.

King David abused his power in committing adultery with Bathsheba, who Matthew names in verse 6 as Uriah's wife. No doubt to remind us how David ruthlessly murdered Uriah as a cover-up of his own sinful deed.

Abraham, Judah and David, three of the great figures of Israel's history, all three great sinners. And it all goes downhill from there. Matthew's list is full of wicked kings. Who worshipped idols, killed the prophets, oppressed the poor and drove the people of Israel into exile under the judgement of God. This is a family of sinners.

- *Sufferers*

But also of sufferers. This is not only a list of the powerful but also of the oppressed. For example, it would have been very uncommon for lists like this to include women. But Matthew does precisely that. Four times in the list from Abraham to David, Matthew includes the *mothers* of the next generation. And in each case it's as if Matthew has searched his Bible for the most scandalous relationships possible.

On the one hand the inclusion of the women serves to highlight the sin of the men to which they are related. And while the actions of Tamar, and Rahab, and Bathsheba are not exactly morally clear-cut – in each case they are also the victims men, and societies, set against them.

Ruth, too, lived through a famine, lost her husband, and was forced to work as a poor labourer for her and her mother-in-law. These women are sufferers.

And so indeed were many of the men. After the exile generation after generation lived under foreign rule, the glories of the kingdom of Israel but a distant memory. In fact, from Jeconiah to Jacob, most of the names are virtually unrecognisable.

- *Strangers*

And so we see the third point. Many names in Matthew's list are not prominent and prestigious people. They're no names, complete strangers to us; in many ways totally uninteresting. Indeed, this royal family becomes so obscure that it ends with a poor young couple in the backwater of Israel called Mary and Joseph.

But there are also strangers of a different kind. Again we see this in the women of the genealogy. Matthew includes in verse 5 Rahab and Ruth. These are Gentile women. They do not belong to Abraham's family. They are outsiders, and yet they are not only made a part of the nation, they find themselves to be great-great-grandmothers to the Messiah Jesus.

It's quite a list isn't it? This is the family that Jesus is born into. A family of sinners, and sufferers and strangers.

And this is our family too. It's all of our families. Yes, the Israelites were God's chosen people, but what we see in the family of Israel is a portrait of the universal human family. It's like humanity turned up to 11. For don't we see in the mess of Israel, the mess of our own family too?

And doesn't Christmas show us this just about more than any other time of year? For if family is the source of much joy at Christmastime, isn't it also the place of much pain.

The same tensions and anxieties played out year after year. Our sin and the sin of others ruining the peace & joy that we hope for. Or we feel the absence of loved ones lost, past suffering stinging us again. Or maybe you look around and see families gathering together and you feel like a stranger and an outsider. Maybe you even like a stranger from your own family. And at the end of a year like this, all of these things might hit home especially hard.

This is what Matthew wants us to know about the family of Israel, and the whole human family, and it rings true to our experience: we're not pure, or powerful, or prestigious. But that is not the end of the story. For what Matthew wants us to know more than anything else is that this family *does have the promises of God*.

This is the headline of his whole gospel. The genealogy of Jesus, **the son of David, the son of Abraham**. Abraham and David were not good men, but they *had* received God's word of promise.

Listen to God's promise to Abraham – and the key phrase is *all people*:

*"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and **all peoples** on earth
will be blessed through you."* (Genesis 12:2-3)

And hear God's promise to David – and the word to look for is *forever*.

*The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom **forever**...Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established **forever**.' "* (2 Samuel 7:11-13,16)

This is God's promise: That through Israel he would bring blessing to the whole world, for all time. And as Matthew traces this family history from Abraham, to David, down through the depths of exile all the way to Jesus the Messiah, He is saying as clearly as he possibly can:

People of Israel, here is your forever king – rejoice!

People of every nation, here is your solid hope – be glad!

God has come at last!

2. The Divine Family

Which leads us the second family of Matthew's genealogy. See, Matthew says that there are 14 generations in each block of his list. But if you were to count carefully you would only find 13 generations from the exile to Jesus.

Now, it could be that Matthew just miscounted. But he has managed to count to 14 twice, you'd think he would be able to make it through a third. So, what's going on here?

I think that Matthew is pointing us to another family at work in and through and around and above the human family. For as you keep reading Matthew's account of Christmas, we meet the divine family of God. As one commentator says, by far the most exciting Father of Matthew's genealogy is the unnamed Father of the climactic 14th generation: God, the Father Almighty, sending his Son Jesus into the world, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here is the Christian God: Father, Son, and Spirit united in love. Full of mercy and faithful to every promise he has ever made.

The Greeks and the Babylonians constructed their genealogies to connect their families to the Gods. But Christianity suggests something completely different: Here is a God who connects himself to us.

And this is the stunning truth of Christmas:

By his coming into the world, Jesus joins himself to our family, so that we might be able to join him in his.

Jesus joins us in all the mess of life in the human family. He shares in our suffering, he himself becomes a stranger in his world, in order to save us from our sin.

As the writer to the Hebrews says:

He became like us in every way...

And again that he was *"tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he **did not sin.**"*

So who is Jesus?

He is the true and better Abraham – he walks around the earth like bubble of blessing that breaks the hold of the curse wherever he goes.

He is the true and better David – rising from the dead, and ruling with perfect righteousness at the right-hand of God.

And between his life and his resurrection is his death. On the cross Jesus experiences the true and better exile. He bears the full weight of God's judgement against sin, so that sinful, suffering, strangers like you and me can be welcomed into his Father's house.

Christmas *is* about family. And we *feel* that deep down because family was at the heart of Christmas from the very beginning. And the joys and sorrows of our little human families here and now echo the ache of our hearts to share in the perfect, unbroken love of the Divine Family: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the words of one of our lesser known Christmas carols:

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.*

Jesus joins himself to our family, so that we might be able to join him in his. He comes into the world and all who receive him are welcomed with open arms. His Father becomes our Father, his Spirit becomes our Spirit, and his Future becomes our Future.

Genealogy → Theology

And so we see that what Matthew has recorded at the beginning of his gospel is not only a genealogy but a theology. This is not just a story of family, but a story of God and the Good News of the Gospel.

And so to finish I want to briefly draw out two implications of the theology of Matthew 1 for us this Christmas:

1. The Comfort of Christmas
2. The Call of Christmas

1. The Comfort of Christmas

Can you see the great comfort of Christmas? Matthew's family tree is a witness to the high and deep, long and wide, love of God. The love of God that reaches down into the depths of sin and suffering; that reaches out to the very ends of the earth.

The reformer Martin Luther said it perfectly. He said it was as if God had intended for someone to read this long list of names and declare: "Oh! Christ is the kind of person who is not ashamed of sinners – in fact he even puts them in his family tree!"

This is the comfort that Christmas offers to all with the ears to hear:

You are not in too deep for the love of God to lift you up.

You are not too far gone for the love of God to bring you home.

This is the deep and wide love of the Father for sinners and sufferers and strangers. Through his Son and by the Spirit, He has moved heaven and earth to bring forgiveness, peace, and welcome. What comfort!

2. *The Call of Christmas*

And this comfort comes with a call.

We started today by thinking about how for so many, family is right at the centre of Christmas. And if that's true, it's also true that the *table* is at the centre of the family.

The heartbeat of the family Christmas is the Christmas lunch or dinner. The meal that brings us together in celebration – and then sends us to the couch for a nap!

At the heart of God's family is a table as well. Today we are sharing in the Lord's supper, and Christmas is an invitation to join God's family meal.

And as God calls us to the table he calls us to take and eat. Not turkey, or prawns, or mangoes, or a trifle, rather he calls us to feed on, and be nourished by Christ himself. To share in his body broken for us, and his blood shed for us. To find the forgiveness of sins and fullness of life that only the Lord Jesus brings.

What we find at Christmas is God calling us to come and receive the fulfilment of our every Christmas longing. Christ is the true gift, the true feast, and he welcomes us into the True Family.

And when we come and eat at his table we don't need to have lie down after. Instead we are filled up to overflowing so that we can then go out to love our messy families, to welcome the outsider and the stranger, and invite people to know the love that God offers to them in Christ.

This is the comfort and the call that God offers us at Christmas:

At Christmas, Jesus comes to us.

And so this Christmas, come home to Jesus.