

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **GENEALOGICAL WOMEN**

**29<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

*The bones of this address were provided by the Very Rev. David Lunan, to whom I am grateful.  
Catherine*

Matthew 1:1-17

I hope you had some surprises on Christmas Day, and I hope that they were good ones: there is more than one kind of surprise. Our God is the God who surprises us, and the closer we walk with him the more surprises there are, but all of them turn out in the end to be good, however they may look to us at first sight. God is not predictable; he is utterly reliable, but he's not predictable. Predictable is boring, but surprises are exciting, joy bringing, life giving; and our God is exciting, joy-bringing and life giving, full of surprises.

It may have been a surprise to you that I read the Genealogy from Matthew as one of our Scriptures today. But it is how Matthew begins the story of Jesus, put there, believe it or not, to grab attention, and in it there are some surprises.

It is, as the first verse puts it, a table of the descent of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. It's a family tree, like you used to see in family Bibles.

To us nowadays, this seems a strange way to start a story. It would put you off, it's like reading a telephone directory. But not for Jews of Jesus time; to them this is riveting stuff; they would pore over it, we would skip it. I get emails and letters every year from people trying to trace their ancestry in these parts, because finding your roots is a current fashion. But the people of Jesus' Judea were even more interested in ancestry than we are to-day, even more than our American or Australian cousins are, and for good reason - there are books of the Bible devoted to names. If a Jew wanted to become a priest he had to be able to trace his family back to Aaron; if he married, his wife had to show that for five generations there were no gentiles in the family.

Matthew is writing for Jews - Luke had a Gentile slant, John addresses the Greek world. This would be one way of Matthew getting the attention of his fellow Jews - they would read on. In fact of course they wouldn't read on, they would listen on, because there would be very few written copies. So people memorised whole books, and recited them.

So as an aid-memoire, Matthew introduces a clever device. In the Hebrew language there are no numbers but A, or Aleph would be one, B, or Beth, would be two and so on. Also there are no vowels, so David would be spelt DVD. And D was the number 4, and V was the number 8; so D plus V plus D adds up to 14. Verse 17 reads; 'There were 14

generations in all. from Abraham to David, [the high point], 14 from David to the exile in Babylon [the low point], 14 from the exile to the Messiah.' David is the key figure, 14 the key number.

However, there are discrepancies; you may have noticed there are only 13 generations from the exile to the Messiah; and if you look at the family tree in Luke's gospel, Joseph's father is not given as Jacob but Heli. No-one can properly explain these differences, and I'm not going to try; what is important is that for the Jewish reader Jesus could trace his family tree back to David and to Abraham. If he could not do that he could not be the Messiah. This is the first claim that Matthew makes; Jesus meets the first requirement. He is the Christ.

It is worth pointing out that the people named here were not all rich and famous and virtuous and powerful; some were, but most we know nothing about.

But by far the most interesting feature of this genealogy is the fact that there were women in it. To Jews of Jesus' day, this was unheard of. If you scour the lists in the Old Testament, you may find one or two. You may think this is a man's world, but it was a hundred times worse in the Palestine of Jesus' day.

Women had no legal rights, they were the property of their father or husband. The regular form of morning prayer for a Pharisee was; 'I thank thee Lord that I am not a gentile, and thou has not made me a slave or a woman.' So Paul - after his conversation, and remember he had been a Pharisee, could write in Galatians 3;28 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave or free, male or female.' Being a follower of Jesus made that much difference to his outlook on life, to the way he regarded other people.

So there are women. And not only are there women, which is surprising enough, but a Jew would immediately recognise who they were, and would be shocked, scandalised even. There's Rahab [v5] who was the harlot of Jericho, who sheltered the two men Joshua had sent in to spy out the promised land before they attacked it. Maybe you have heard this story too often for what I have just said to make an impact. Rahab was a harlot. When I was working for a Methodist church in suburban Chicago, I remember taking the confirmation class, girls aged about 12, to visit other denominations, and in one - the Presbyterian church - the minister was preaching about Rahab and using the modern word - prostitute. The girls were electrified! They had not realised that such scandalous things were mentioned in the Bible. And here she is, not just in the Bible, but in Jesus' family tree.

Then there's Ruth, who was a righteous woman, but she wasn't a Jew. She was Moabite, and the law stated in Deuteronomy 23; 3 'An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter the congregation of the Lord - not even after ten generations.' Her race was despised and outlawed.

Then there's Tamar. And I couldn't tell you her story without blushing, but you can find it in Genesis 38. She makes Rahab seem positively main-stream and respectable.

And lastly there's Bathsheba whom David saw bathing, sent for her, and seduced her; then David went further by ensuring her husband Uriah was killed in battle; bringing shame on himself, and on his lineage.

As Professor William Barclay wrote, 'If Matthew had ransacked the Old Testament for improbable candidates he could not have found four more unlikely ancestors for Jesus Christ.'

This is precisely the good news of the gospel. We begin hearing it even before Jesus is introduced onto the scene. You don't have to be a Jew to be included, you don't have to be male to be counted, and you don't even have to be good, for Christ came for sinners. Martin Luther said, 'Christ is only found among sinners.' All we have to do is trust him, believe in him, walk in his way, do the Father's will and we are part of the family of God. God's love is redemptive, God's love is for everyone, God's love is for you.

Planned from the beginning of time, our God surprises us once again. The coming of Christ means the coming of the Kingdom, and it's here, it's now, we can all join in. Our Lord has ushered in a new world order, a new Godly order, where the power and the glory belong to God and God alone in this kingdom of love, where there is a place for everyone, every man, woman and child; and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together. Amen.

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