

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Advent Surprises

Sunday Dec 23rd

Psalm 34:1-18

Luke 2:8-20

Genealogical research is very popular these days, now that the internet has made it much easier than it used to be. Every year I get people emailing me to ask about ancestors that they think are buried in the cemetery – usually in Laggan cemetery – the people of Laggan seem to have travelled very widely! My own sister has been looking into the genealogy of our father, and in particular of his mother who was adopted at birth, and has come up with some very interesting findings. But if you have ever tried to trace your own family tree, you will know that you have to be selective about what and who you look into in detail, because very quickly a family tree develops an awful lot of twigs.

There are two genealogies of Jesus given in the Gospels, and the readers will be very glad that I have not asked them to read either one of them today. To our modern ears and to our modern understanding, the ancestor lists that are so common in the Bible seem pretty tedious and pointless. But to the people for whom they were first written down they were full of meaning. Ancestor lists were a shorthand way of showing connections, helping people to remember how they were related, and reminding them of the story that they found themselves in. So Jesus' genealogies remind us of how he was connected, and what was the story into which he was born.

The two lists for Jesus' genealogy are actually very different – no one can trace all the branches on a family tree. However they agree on two essential points. The first is that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham and Sarah. This reminded people of one part of the story into which Jesus was born: the part that said that through Abraham's descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. The second

agreement is that Jesus was a descendant of King David. That brought to mind the part of the story which was known as the golden age of David's reign. This was the part of the past for which people were nostalgic, the part that the prophets pointed back to while pointing forward to a coming Messiah. But apart from these two places where the lists agree, they offer us distinct treasures.

The genealogy in Luke's gospel, which comes at the beginning of the account of Jesus' ministry, starts with the present and goes backwards, all the way to David, then Abraham and then to Adam, the original human in the Genesis story. Luke says Jesus is "...Son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God." (You bet they were glad not to have to read out that list!) Luke ends by saying "son of God" which is fascinating. First it suggests that the phrase "son of" means to find your origin in. But it also suggests that Jesus, as the son of Adam, is in some way a new beginning for the human race – a new genesis. Just as Adam bore the image of God as the original human, Jesus will now reflect the image of God. He is Adam mark 2 – a point which Paul will make much of in his later writing. Just as the phrase, earlier in the descending order of ancestors, "son of David" prepares us to expect Jesus to model leadership, and "son of Abraham" prepares us to expect Jesus to model blessing and promise, so "son of God" sets us up to expect Jesus to model true humanity as Adam did: true humanity the way it was supposed to be.

Matthew's version works the other way beginning in distant times, with Abraham. The treasures it gives us are linked to his very surprising inclusion of five women. In the ancient world ancestor lists focussed on men only, as it was thought that the woman brought nothing to the conception but was merely an incubator in which the man's seed grew. The five women Matthew lists are really quite astonishing. First there is Tamar. She had one posed as a prostitute in a web of sexual and family intrigue – which involved seducing her father-in-law. Then there is Rahab – a Gentile of Jericho who actually was a prostitute – not just pretending to be one like Rahab. Then Ruth, another Gentile who entered into a pre-marital liaison with a wealthy Jew named Boaz. Then Bathsheba who was married to a foreigner – Uriah the Hittite – and with whom King David committed adultery. Finally there is Mary, who claims to be pregnant without the help of Joseph. These were not the kind of women who were typically included in ancestor lists of the great.

But that is Matthew's point. He uses these surprises to remind us of the story into which Jesus was entering, and it was not a pristine story of ideal people. He is part of the story of Gentiles as well as Jews, broken and messy families as well as noble ones, normal people as well as kings and priests and heroes. Jesus isn't entering humanity from the top, with trickle-down grace, but from the bottom, with grace that rises from the grass roots up. One of the points of our holding our monthly Messy Church gatherings is not just so that we can have fun with crafts, but so that we can remember that Jesus came to the mess that we are, and didn't wait for us to be perfect.

And that theme is also given us by Luke in a different way when he tells the story of the shepherds. The shepherds are the ones who, along with Mary and Joseph, have the opportunity to welcome the "good news of great joy to all the people" which the angels tell of. The shepherds are the down-to-earth people who hear the celestial announcement from angelic messengers. Most of the western world have a picture of shepherds that is a bit romantic and slightly idyllic. They see them through the lenses of this beloved Christmas story. We have our own image of shepherds, because we live in a country where there are lots of sheep, but we do not have the same view of shepherding that the world Jesus entered did.

Shepherds were marginal people in that society – a lot like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. They weren't normal family men, because they lived outdoors most of the time, guarding sheep from wolves and thieves, and guiding them to suitable pasture. A younger son, for whom there was no hope of inheriting, might become a shepherd – think of David, the youngest of seven, who had to be fetched from the sheep when Samuel comes to anoint him. A man who was in some way deemed not suitable for marriage might become a shepherd. A man who had no other option might fall into this way of life. And it was among poor men like these that Jesus' birth was first celebrated.

The poor have a special place in the Bible. The priests and prophets agreed that God had a special concern for the poor, even if they had to say it often so that people wouldn't forget. God commanded right-living people to be generous to the poor. The landless were to be allowed to glean the edges of the fields – think of Ruth. And the book of Proverbs says that those who exploited the poor or simply didn't care

about them would not prosper, while those who were good to the poor would be blessed.

This needed to be said over and over, because the general understanding of the people around was that if someone was poor it was their own fault and was a sign of God's displeasure. An attitude which has not completely gone away. So Jesus was born into the story of women on the edge and his birth was told to outsiders who were poor shepherds. He would go on to proclaim that his role was to preach good news to the poor and to pronounce them blessed.

At Christmas time many charities make an appeal to our pockets, hoping that we will feel guilty about spending so much on our own family and our own celebrations and will give to the poor. Because this has not changed since the time of Christ – that a small percentage of the world's population lives in luxury and the majority live in poverty. Today's "shepherds" are those who live on less than a pound a day, working in rice fields, streaming into slums, sleeping on pavements, selling their children into bonded labour, struggling to survive. Jesus taught that those who were rich should give, and give generously. As we consider the surprises of the Christmas story we should not forget that.

Jesus the leader, the son of David; Jesus the blessing, the promise bearer, the son of Abraham; Jesus the new humanity, the son of Adam, the son of God has come into this world as it is. He has not waited until we should have reached the stage of being worthy of his coming. And he came through a family that included women on the edge of respectability, and the men who knew them, because life is not tidy but messy, not simple, but complicated. He came and was welcomed first of all by those who were poor and on the margins of society.

If we want to welcome him, we must do it with honesty: allowing him into the messy parts of our lives: the places where we are poor and rejected, where we are ashamed and hopeless – that was what he came to be a part of, what he came to transform.

If we want to welcome him, we must look at the people whom he thought were important to God and identify with them. So when we give – at Christmas time or any other time – we do not do it in a spirit of condescension, but because we are saying "You are poor in body, but I am poor in spirit; we both know poverty, and Jesus came for us all."

So as we move from the time of Advent into the season of Christmas let us remember the marginal people in the world – all who are marginalised, dispossessed, vulnerable, hungry for good nutrition thirsty for drinkable water, desperate to know that they are not forgotten, even as we all want to know this. Let us join them in their vigil of hope – waiting for good news of great joy for all people. All people. Amen.