

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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WHERE YOU BELONG

7th January 2018

Isaiah 11:1-5
Matthew 1:1-17

“Who do you think you are?” asks the TV series, which traces genealogy. And various celebrities trace back parts of their family's story, sometimes just from interest, sometimes in an attempt to understand themselves better. Certainly there is a story or two in everyone's past, even if some of us, like me, like to think that we are not just the sum of our antecedents, but a person in our own right! Matthew begins his account of Jesus' life and ministry with a genealogy. He is the only one of the gospel writers to do this. Luke has a list of ancestors, but it comes a few pages into his gospel, while Mark and John begin with the appearance of John the Baptist on the scene, and so we first meet Jesus, devoid of background as an adult man.

But Matthew starts with a genealogy. This is partly, of course, because he was writing mainly for a Jewish readership, and the Jews were a people who loved to know where they had come from. The Old Testament has several lists of ancestors at various points, in Genesis – where they are quite short lists! – at the end of the book of Ruth, pointing ahead to King David; while part of the story of the exodus is the extensive numbering and description of the people. Where you came from mattered – of course it did, if you were part of the people who were chosen by God. Your family tree mattered too. It showed where you belonged and what might be expected of you.

The Christmas story, which we have, of course, been thinking about, is a glorious mix up of personal and political happenings. It is about the decisions of kings and the intimate affairs of family, and the genealogy with which Matthew begins his gospel brings out both elements. In it we find the great and the good. We find Abraham, to whom all Jews should be able to trace their ancestry. Abraham, the father of the nation, renowned for his faith and obedience to God, with the courage of a pioneer. From Abraham every Jew also had Isaac, the man who made favourites, the man who stood in his father's shadow. Then Jacob, the trickster who wrestled with God until he found faith.

It was after Jacob that the family trees of the Jews began to sprout branches. Jesus' genealogy was from the line of Judah. Judah was a chequered character. He came out well by the end of the Joseph story, offering himself instead of his brother Benjamin to be held captive by Joseph, so that his father should be spared the sorrow of losing his youngest. But earlier in Judah's story he showed less honour in the way that he treated the prostitute Tamar – a story we don't read in Sunday School.

So Jesus had founding fathers in his line of descent, and he had the greatest of the kings, David himself. And in having David, he also has Boaz before him, and Solomon after him. And then from Solomon's line you can read of the exploits of the kings in this list in the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament. Some

good, some less so. This takes us up to Zedekiah who was taken into exile, while the book of Ezra shows us Zerubbabel, coming back to his land from exile, not as king but as governor. But from there on, the names on the list become increasingly obscure. Not every son and grandson of a governor will be renowned or remembered. That doesn't mean that they did nothing worthwhile, or that they may not have had many good qualities. And, of course, being renowned does not always mean that a person does have good qualities. There can be more than one thing for which we may be remembered.

The way that this family tree which Matthew lays before us descends into the unknown, the ordinary citizen, speaks to us of God's grace. He sent his son into an ordinary family, one which had the usual strains and stresses of family life to deal with – at least once they finally settled in Nazareth.

The fortnight of holiday which we have just had is for most people associated with family and get-togethers. Kingussie High School posted a video online which went round the school asking what Christmas was about, and everyone said getting together with family and friends. (No one mentioned the birth of Jesus.) T.V. ads are all about families getting together one way or another. And the family aspect of the Christmas and New Year celebrations can be the part which many people find hardest. Because the people who know us best are not always the easiest to spend a lot of time with, especially if we don't usually see them. Old sores are likely to be rubbed a little raw as well as old jokes rehearsed, and old joys revisited. Families are the people who can help us best and hurt us most, sometimes simultaneously, and you can love them and dread them all at the same time.

Jesus was born into a family. He didn't drop fully formed into God's story, as Mark or John could be thought to be saying. Matthew's genealogy, as much as his birth story, gives us his background, tells us – or at least would have told the contemporary Jews – what kind of household he grew up in. Ordinary people. A family of craftsmen, by the time he came along. People remembered simply for having been there, in the family line, but whose deeds were not recorded anywhere for public knowledge. Ordinary people. And yet from their family was to come the Son of God.

I am sure that the obscure generations in the genealogy, Achim and Eliud and Eleazar and Matthan and Jacob, would have been surprised at what was to come through their family line. Yes, they would be able to trace their roots – being descended from King David was a matter to remember and be proud of – but they would have thought that the important days of their family were in the past. But no one knows how important he or she is in God's eyes. When we hold a funeral, the form of words that I like to use at the committal is this:

We affirm that none of us lives in vain, labours in vain, gives or receives or loves in vain.

Within the eternal purpose, each of us is worth more than we can ever calculate.

For (why not fill in your own name here)'s life as it touched and enriched ours, we give God the glory.

May he grant to all his people, pardon, peace and life eternal.

If you fill your name into that thought, I hope that it brings you hope and courage at the start of a new year. You do not know how important you are in God's scheme of

things. You do not know what your life, your loving, your very being may mean or come to mean. But you are cherished.

I like that there are unknown people in the list of Jesus' antecedents. It speaks to me of the importance of all people, great or not. It speaks to me of God's hand lovingly, gently shaping the story. It speaks to me of how we too should treat people with gentleness and love, all people, including ourselves.

Jesus' genealogy tells us what kind of family he grew up in, but it tells us too, what he was expected to measure up to.

If you have someone remarkable sitting in the branches of your family tree, then you might well feel that you have to be worthy of them. Or others might expect that of you. When my mother died, one of her friends told my brother and sister and me that with parents like ours, we had a lot to live up to. (He meant well.) Jesus had not just Abraham – all Jews had him, - but King David to live up to. And of course, by plotting out his genealogy, Matthew is showing that he came in response to prophecy. He came from "the stump of Jesse," he was the shoot who was to bring wisdom, judgement and righteousness. He had a lot to live up to.

But of course, the prophecies were just the tip of the iceberg as far as Jesus was concerned. He didn't just have his family tree on the earthly side to live up to, but his family tree on the heavenly side. Later it was he who was to tell people "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father in perfect," and this was the family expectation that he took upon himself.

I don't know how far back you can trace your family tree, how long your genealogy might be – if you can make it through 42 generations such as Matthew presents us with here, you are doing very well indeed! But even if you can, even if you can get right back to Kenneth McAlpine and beyond, if you are a child of God then this is only one aspect of your family. Because if you are one of God's children, born into his family through faith in Jesus, then the genealogy which we read today is also yours. And Gods' family is your family.

And yes, that is a lot to live up to, but there is something else to remember as well. One of the things which families have to do, over and over, is to forgive each other. If you are to stay close, then you have to forgive. It's not easy, especially when it happens over and over again. Remember the man who asked Jesus if he really had to forgive his brother as many as seven times? And remember Jesus' answer?

Families forgive. And so does your heavenly Father. He knows that you, that I, want to live up to him, that out of love for him we want to live in his loving, selfless way. And yes, it hurts him when we fail. But because he is our Father, because this is what families do, he also treats us with tenderness, and forgives.

So whoever sits in the branches of your family tree, saint or sinner, they do not define you. You are more than the sum of your DNA, for you are a child of God. And this makes you the most special person anyone will ever meet. And that is a matter, not for pride but for humility, a thought to encourage us to make the loving and gentle response in life. Amen.