



Sermon Notes: Kim Thomason,

12 May 2024

“God's Grace for all”

Readings: Matthew 1:1-16, Psalm 68:4-6, Deut 10:12-22

Is there anything in your family history that makes you feel proud? Maybe a distant relative achieved great things. Perhaps someone made a significant contribution to their community or overcame great adversity. You may be reaping the benefits of one person's life and choices that set the subsequent generations up for success. Conversely, there may be people, or their actions, that make you cringe. People and things that are not so great.

Some people are very interested in their history and if you've researched your family history, it's quite likely that you, more than anyone, understand the relationships of who's who at family gatherings. You have the low down on the cousins, the history of the aunts, and the name of that person we don't mention.

Quite possibly your research has yielded information that you never dreamed as being part of your heritage and things you may not want to highlight.

But that's not what we find with our reading from Matthew's gospel today. Matthew commences his gospel with a history lesson of who's who in the family tree and he starts boldly:

'This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.'

Matthew is writing about Jesus, tracing the ancestral line of Jesus to David, then all the way back to Abraham. This book is the story of Jesus who descends from the royal line of King David, and whose ancestor Abraham was called by God to become a great nation and a blessing to all people on earth.

Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience – people who would have known their history and for whom family descent was very important. They were expecting the Messiah to come from David's line. They knew that God had promised Abraham, that he would be a blessing for all people. At the very start of his gospel account, Matthew places Jesus front and centre as the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises – as the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

So, having established Jesus as the reason for this genealogy, Matthew begins to list the family names. And there are lots of them! You probably noticed that the vast majority of them are the names of the fathers. Although it wasn't unheard of to list women in a genealogy at this time, it was unusual. Which perhaps makes it an even more interesting passage to study together today on Mothers' Day.

So, what are we going to find? People whose lives and actions make us proud or the names of those people we whisper.

Matthew includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah's wife and Mary.

Verse three of Chapter one states:

'Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob, (this is the Jacob we're studying in our current series,
Wrestling with Jacob)

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.'

'Whose mother was Tamar' – that's all we're given. But remember, Matthew is communicating to a Jewish audience, to people who knew their history, people who knew the name 'Tamar' and her history. Her name and her story would have been familiar, but her inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus would have been unexpected, to say the least.

We find the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. Tamar is married to Judah's firstborn son, Er. We are not told much about Er except that he

'was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death.'

Let's never kid ourselves that we can keep things hidden from God.

Tamar is then given to the next son, Onan, which was a culturally appropriate practice for ensuring an heir in the family line. However, Onan did what *'was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also.'* Tamar is widowed twice. The men have been evil and have done evil, but Tamar is the one who suffers as a widow. Judah, her father-in-law, promises that he will give his third son to Tamar when that son grows up, but he actually has no intention of doing that and in Genesis 38 verse 11 we read,

'Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's household.'

Send Tamar back to her father, never let her marry the third son – problem solved.

Do we do anything like this today? We may not be sending adult children back to their parents, but when we recognise problems do we address them or push them aside and just hope they disappear? What choices do we make? What is it that stops us addressing the things that we know need to change? Things in ourselves and things in our society.

When we pray, *'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'*, we are praying for things to change. And those changes involve our choices.

Instead of dealing with the evil in his own family, his son Er was evil, his son Onan did evil, Judah chose to ignore their behaviour and to reject his responsibility to provide Tamar with his third son and the means for her to continue the family line. The people in Tamar's life with the responsibility for her welfare, namely her husbands and her father-in-law, reneged on their obligations, forcing Tamar to fend for herself. And this is where the family tree gets a little sordid.

The third son grows up and Tamar knows that she is being denied what is rightfully hers. Judah's wife dies and, after grieving, he travels near to where Tamar is living. Tamar is a rejected woman seeking justice. She seizes the opportunity that Judah's proximity will bring. Tamar disguises herself as a temple prostitute and Judah sleeps with her. The sons resulting from this union, Perez and Zerah, are the ones listed in the genealogy.

Before we judge Tamar and condemn her actions, we need to read Judah's response when he realises that his daughter-in-law is guilty of prostitution and pregnant out of wedlock.

In verse 24 of Genesis 38 Judah says,

'Bring her out and have her burned to death!'

Burned to death. Really? This woman is not a stranger. Has the man no compassion for the widow in his own family? Judah's declaration that Tamar be brought out and burned to death will guarantee that she will never marry the third son. Done and dusted!

But let's pause for a moment and consider this a little deeper. In killing Tamar, Judah will be inadvertently killing his own children. This story is awful. It's sordid. It's probably not the history that you and I would highlight in a family account. But here it is in the first chapter of the

first book of the New Testament – the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

When Judah realises that Tamar is the 'prostitute' he has used and is now condemning to death, Judah declares in verse 26 that *'She, (Tamar,) is more righteous than I.'*

Tamar, the neglected widow, the rejected daughter-in-law, used deceit to claim her rights – the rights denied her by the men in her life – and Judah declares her to be *'more righteous'* than himself.

We need to remember that God cares about justice. God saw, and honoured, Tamar. A woman whose heart was seeking justice and whose circumstances drove her to deceit.

One of my favourite musicals of all times is Les Misérables. The drama. The passion. The fight against injustice. I leave the theatre singing the songs and ready to join the revolution. The main character, Jean Valjean, has been imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread – bread that he stole to feed his sister's starving children. The circumstances of Jean Valjean in early 19th century France have driven this desperate man to theft.

Everything in me screams that his imprisonment is wrong. Where is justice?

It's high drama and I find myself reacting strongly to the story of a musical that I am seeing for entertainment yet reacting not nearly so strongly to the current realities of injustice today. Perhaps that's your experience too. Why is that? Why can we be so moved by a fictional story and so unmoved by the unjust reality of millions? Is it that we can afford for our hearts to engage with an historical story because we can experience the emotions without any lasting impact? We think we don't need to worry, because we can't change what happened. Engaging with the reality of injustice today, however, might challenge our lifestyles, might confront us with the choices of our financial investments and possibly humble us to the point that, like Judah, we declare others to be more righteous than ourselves.

Tamar's heart sought justice. Judah's responsibility was to provide that. The inclusion of Tamar in this genealogy reveals God's heart for justice and Tamar's story demonstrates God's expectation that those in positions of power and privilege will provide that justice. Many of us have more power and privilege than we wish to acknowledge and when it comes to providing justice, we will be held accountable for our actions, and probably more likely, for our inactions. Tamar sought justice and God honoured her.

God has a heart for justice. We need to have a heart for justice too.

The second woman Matthew includes comes two verses later, in verse five, with Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. We meet Rahab in the second chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua. Joshua, leading the Israelites, has sent two spies to Jericho to look over the land as part of his warfare strategy to conquer the land. Understandably, the king of Jericho sends his men to find the spies. The two spies need to hide. They seek refuge in the house of a prostitute named Rahab. Rahab hides the two men on her roof and sends the king's men on a wild goose chase out of the city gate. When the immediate danger has passed, Rahab tells the spies,

'I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.'

Rahab recognises the work of God and, unlike the other people in Jericho, she connects with the spies and aligns her life, and the lives of her family members, with God's people. When the walls of Jericho fall, Rahab and her entire family are brought out and placed outside the camp of Israel before Joshua spares them and brings them to live among the Israelites.

The inclusion of Rahab in this genealogy reveals to us that God welcomes all who turn to him, even the foreign prostitute, even her family and all who belonged to her. They are brought in to

live among the Israelites. Rahab is not saved to live as a second-class citizen apart from the Israelites because there are no second-class citizens in God's family. We are all saved by grace alone and Rahab, the foreign prostitute, the person we might never have expected to be in our family tree, is honoured by her inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus.

Interestingly, Rahab was the mother of Boaz and Boaz is the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth – the third woman whose name Matthew includes in verse five. The story of Ruth is found in the Old Testament book of the same title – Ruth. It's a small book, about a third of the way through the Old Testament, and in there we meet Ruth, a Moabite. She and her mother-in-law are both widows and, after the deaths of her husband and father-in-law, it would have been expected that she would return to her family of origin. However, when Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, decides to return to God's people in Bethlehem, Ruth declares to Naomi that,

'Your people will be my people and your God my God.'

She will leave her homeland, remain with Naomi and worship the LORD. Ruth is making a choice that has far reaching consequences, way beyond what she could have imagined. Moabites and Israelites, however, did not get along. The family tree had some deep-rooted conflict and Deuteronomy 23:3 we find that to the tenth generation, a Moabite was not to be admitted to the congregation. Israelites and Moabites were not to mix. They had, what we might describe as, 'history'. Ruth is choosing to accompany her mother-in-law into potentially hostile territory because she has made a choice to seek God. She is connecting to Naomi and through her, to God and to God's people. Ruth has never been to Bethlehem, and she doesn't know the reception that she will receive. But she has made a choice.

'Your people will be my people and your God my God.'

In the Old Testament book of Ruth, we read that after settling in Bethlehem, Ruth is gleaning, that is, picking the leftover grain after harvest. Gleaning was a system instituted in the book of Leviticus and designed to provide the poor and the marginalised of society with opportunities to work and to feed themselves. It's different to charity. The grain was not given to the recipients; they had to pick it for themselves. Working in this manner promoted dignity and self-worth. And in the act of gleaning, Ruth reveals both her character and her circumstances. Ruth is certainly hardworking, and she is also poor. Here, in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, we find, not just a woman, but a poor, widowed, Moabite woman whose choice to align her life with God is honoured and affirmed in history. In the opening verses of the New Testament, Ruth's place in this genealogy hints at the universality of Jesus' mission. The gospel is for Jews and Gentiles, the poor, the outcast, the rejected, the widowed. It is for all who seek to connect with God through Jesus.

The fourth woman Matthew includes is found in verse six.

'David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.'

Chapter 11 of the book of 2 Samuel in the Old Testament contains the story of Uriah's wife. From this account we know her as Bathsheba: Uriah's wife, King David's object of desire leading to adultery and then, when she was pregnant from that union, the widow of Uriah whom King David had killed. Uriah's wife: adultery, murder, widowhood ... and inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus! We can't be certain why Matthew refers to Bathsheba as 'Uriah's wife' rather than by her own name, but it does serve to highlight the circumstances surrounding the choices of King David and the fact that even the family tree of Jesus is not without blemish. Neither are ours. But we know from 2 Samuel that the sins of King David are acknowledged, the people involved are forgiven, and Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, is deemed worthy of inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus.

Which brings us to Mary. She's included at the end of the list in verse 16.

'...and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.'

Mary – a young woman, pregnant before marriage in a culture where that circumstance would have attracted shame and rejection. In verses 18 - 19 of this chapter, Matthew tells us that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant. You may know this story from Christmas. Joseph did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace so he decided to divorce her quietly. An angel spoke with Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary home and to not be afraid. Shame and rejection were very real possibilities. But God knows Mary, and God honours her.

Let's be honest, when you heard that genealogy being read today were you wondering why I would choose this passage? Seriously? Why read a list of mainly male names when there are so many passages on love or families more suited to Mothers' Day?

What could the inclusion of these five women possibly reveal about God for us today?

Well, Jesus has a habit of turning our expectations upside down, doesn't he? Of challenging our perceptions of what is 'right', of how things 'should' be done and doing them in a way that honours people, that bestows dignity, that welcomes and includes the lost and the rejected.

We all have history. There are things in every family that bring shame or that make us cringe. Perhaps there are things in our own lives that we are desperately keeping hidden. Things that we think are just too awful to face.

Yet the inclusion of these women in the genealogy of Jesus shows us that there is nothing in our history, nothing in our lives today, that is too awful for the grace of God.

The gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham, is a message of grace for all. The deceiver, the prostitute, the foreigner, the widow, those who are shamed and rejected and ignored, the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised in society, are the very ones welcomed and honoured in God's kingdom. Jesus looks beyond the human labels of legitimacy and illegitimacy, of acceptable heritage, of majority culture, of education and wealth and status, to offer salvation to all who turn to him.

This is good news!

There is grace for all, so will you join with me and turn to Jesus today, as we pray together now.