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Jesus the Jew (Matthew 1. 1-17)

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Have you ever noticed how the four gospels get themselves underway, how they begin? They all acknowledge that they *are* at a beginning – and not only the beginning of a text, but the beginning of a huge new story. Mark does it with characteristic economy and directness: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God’, fullstop. And then he’s straight into Isaiah’s prophecy and the proclamation of John the Baptist. No infancy narratives, no childhood of Jesus – just bang, into the adult ministry. John takes a cosmic approach, referencing the beginning of the creation itself and connecting the story and person of Christ with God’s purposes from all eternity: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him ... ’ and so on and so forth. Luke is less dramatic than Mark, less cosmic than John. He sidles up to his readers, almost cosily, corresponding like a friend: ‘Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us ... I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’. And off he goes, with Zechariah in the temple and the birth of John the Baptist.

Well, this year, the lectionary draws our Sunday readings largely from the gospel of Matthew, and I thought it might be helpful to spend a few weeks considering the gospel as a whole, so that we approach the text not simply piecemeal, one parable after

another, but in the light of its distinctive concerns, questions and context. So tonight, we begin with Matthew's beginning. And Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. To our ears, this is not the catchiest way he could have done it – but theologically speaking, there's a lot going on in this way of kicking off the story.

The writer of Matthew's gospel is usually thought to have been a Jewish Christian, a Christian Jew. Traditionally, he has been identified with Matthew the tax-collector who, according to the gospel itself, was one of the twelve disciples. Nowadays he is thought to have been a resident of Antioch in Syria writing, in the late first century (in the 80s CE) after the destruction of Jerusalem, in a community of Jewish Christians.¹ Whoever exactly 'Matthew' was, the meaning and significance of Jesus was for him incomprehensible apart from his Jewish context, and the long history of God's relationship with the people of Israel. And this is signalled from the very beginning.

When Luke's gospel gives the genealogy of Jesus (in Chapter 3), it too traces Jesus' family line through David and Abraham. But whereas in Matthew's version, the genealogy begins with Abraham and descends to Jesus, in Luke's version we start with Jesus, son of Joseph and continue back past David and Abraham through the pre-history of Israel to the origins of all humankind, so that the genealogy concludes: 'son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God' (Luke 3.38). Luke, in other words, is inclined to see Jesus at the apex of the whole human story which began at creation; Matthew is inclined to see him as the fulfilment of the history of Israel which began with Abraham. These aren't mutually exclusive approaches – it's just that, for Matthew, Jesus is principally to be 'read' as the culmination of the *particular* divine project of salvation inaugurated by God's calling of Abraham to become the father of a great nation in

¹ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 36-37.

whom 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen. 12.3). In Jesus, this ancient promise is fulfilled.

The genealogy says still more. It is divided into three sets of fourteen generations, though (truth be told) the text itself appears to miscount and has only thirteen in the final set. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes that 3 groups of fourteen equates to 6 groups of seven names: 'the number seven was and is one of the most powerful symbolic numbers, and to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven in the sequence is clearly to be the climax of the whole list. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what Israel has been waiting for for two thousand years'.²

The first group of fourteen generations culminates with King David; the second group culminates with the Babylonian exile; and the third group culminates with Jesus. The genealogy thus encompasses the highpoint of Israel's national history under the legendary David, its nadir in exile and destruction, and makes the extraordinary claim that in Jesus, at the end of history, *God* has come to be with the people. Matthew identifies Jesus as the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah, 'Emmanuel', which means 'God is with us'.

Matthew's genealogy also includes four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and 'the wife of Uriah' whose name was Bathsheba. Traditionally the genealogies of Israel, as well as Luke's genealogy, name only men which suggests we need to pay special attention here. What's more, these women are all in some sense outsiders to Israel – they do not belong ethnically and some aura of impropriety surrounds each one. Rahab was a prostitute, and Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba have stories that don't exactly conform to 'Christian family values'. Yet each has a profoundly significant place and role in Israel's story. Their presence in the genealogy testifies to the fact that God has always been the God of more than just Israel, and that God chooses surprising people to be

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part 1 (London: SPCK, 2002), p.3.

bearers of divine purpose. They remind us that the coming of Jesus under unlikely circumstances, and his mission to the Gentiles, is not inconsistent with the way God has worked in Israel's past. There is continuity here – though it is the kind of continuity that encompasses the ever-present possibility of novelty and surprise.

Well, it is perhaps easy to see why for the Jewish Matthew and his community, all of this was important to signify. He is claiming, implicitly, that following Jesus constitutes faithfulness to their inherited tradition, rather than apostasy; that Jesus was the fulfilment of this tradition and not its negation or abandonment. And the genealogy is not the only place this happens – more than any other, Matthew's gospel insists on Jesus as the fulfilment of what has been foretold by the prophets, and interprets the story of his life, death and resurrection with reference to the Hebrew scriptures. Scholars relate that there are more than sixty Old Testament quotations in this gospel, not to mention Scriptural allusions that number in the hundreds.³

But how is the 'Jewishness' of Matthew's gospel important for us? What does its insistence on the continuity between the story of Israel and the story of Jesus and the church make available to us? I suspect how we respond to those questions will evolve and deepen over these few weeks, as we spend more time with Matthew's gospel. For now, let me suggest two things.

One, in the Jewish tradition, the way God is made known, the way God works in the world, is not detachable from the very particularity of Israel's history, worked out in political, communal, economic, agricultural terms. If Jesus is the fulfillment of this tradition, this long process of God's self-revelation in and through this people, then it means there is nothing simply 'inward' about our spiritual journey. Salvation is salvation *history*. It is worked out over time, in particular places and particular lives – in the lives

³ David Neville, 'Things New and Old: Preaching from Matthew in Year A', *St Mark's Review*, No.216, May 2011(2), 32.

of people who have names and who make choices for or against God in all the details of their daily life. Jesus the Jew is Saviour of the bodily, created, corporate, political world. And that has radical implications for what faithfulness to this God involves, as a whole body, whole of life commitment.

And two, God is the same God. Our understandings of God may deepen and evolve. But God is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow – and this means that, in the life of faith, we may look for continuities and recognizable patterns as well as being open to newness and unimagined possibilities. Matthew insists there's a coherence to things that underlies our imperfect understanding, our changing perceptions – Jesus is foretold by the prophets. So part of what salvation means for Matthew, I think, is the integration of our past with our present and our future. With God, we do not become exiles from our own history – either personally or corporately – but we find ourselves being drawn into a larger wholeness, a larger story that reconciles all things.

At one level, these are familiar points. But we should also notice how extraordinary they are. Our God, the God of Israel come among us in the person of Jesus, is the energy seeking the transformation of ordinary, embodied life into justice, mercy and peace; our God is reconciling relation who wants our participation as whole persons in the divine relationship of love. There is nothing necessary about this concept of God – the gods of the Romans had utterly different concerns.

As Matthew brings to our remembrance the whole of our tradition's story and experience of God, so may we discover anew how our faithfulness to *this* God might heal our world.