

Sermon, Leith Valley, Sunday 2 December, 2019
First Sunday in Advent
Paul Trebilco

Reading: Ruth 1:1-5; Matt 1:1-17

Matthew 1:1-17 is a long genealogy. ... You probably think it's a little strange to read it. A list of names! But it's right at the start of the New Testament – and this is how Matthew chooses to begin his Gospel – so clearly it's important.

I was talking to a Korean Christian recently – David. David knew his genealogy back 66 generations – to the year 2!!! Amazing. And he said many Koreans would be the same. Many Māori would know their genealogies – their whakapapa – too. So perhaps my view that this genealogy is strange or unimportant, is a very pakeha view.

But what does it tell us?

Did you notice that there are five women mentioned here? This is very unusual, in what is otherwise an exclusively male list.

v3: Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by *Tamar*.

v5: Salmon the father of Boaz by *Rahab*, and Boaz the father of Obed by *Ruth*.

v6: And David was the father of Solomon by *the wife of Uriah* – that's Bathsheba. And then of course there is Mary, Jesus' mother.

So why are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba mentioned – in an otherwise very male list? Of course, this was a patriarchal society, so normally only males were listed in genealogies. What is it about these 4 women?

Let me suggest that the stories of these women are primarily stories of people in tragic, challenging situations – and yet highly unexpected or unusual things happen in these tragic, broken situations and in all of this we can see God's hand.

Yet, these are the ancestors of Jesus!! That this brokenness is taken up and incorporated into the genealogy of Jesus shows that God does highly unexpected things. God is at work in our brokenness; God turns situations around, redeems them, and uses them for his purposes. Let me develop this.

Tamar's story is told in Gen 38. She married a guy named Er. He died before they had children. Then according to custom, Tamar marries Onan, the next brother. He dies too. Judah, the father of Er and Onan does not want to have his last son Shelah marry Tamar – in case he dies too! So Judah, the father, leaves Tamar as a very vulnerable widow. When the opportunity comes, Tamar dresses up like a prostitute, has sex with Judah, the father, and conceives. When she is three months pregnant, she confronts Judah and he acknowledges that he was in the wrong, and Tamar was right. Their son, Perez is the ancestor of king David.

Rahab's story is in Joshua 2 and 6. She is the prostitute from Jericho so she is not Jewish. She takes in two Israelite men when they are scouting out the city. Rahab saves

them from the king of Jericho. When the Israelites conquer Jericho, she and her family are saved – because of all they have done for Israel.

Ruth features in the book of Ruth. She is a Moabite – so a non-Israelite – who marries an Israelite, named Mahlon. But Mahlon soon dies. The book of Ruth is the story of how Ruth faithfully stays with Naomi, her mother-in-law and they travel back to Bethlehem. She eventually meets Boaz, who agrees to marry Ruth. They have a son named Obed, who is the grand-father of King David.

The fourth woman is called ‘the wife of Uriah’ in Matthew 1. She is Bathsheba. The story is in 2 Sam 11–12. King David saw Bathsheba having a bath, lusted after her, and had sex with Bathsheba and she conceived. David then arranged for Bathsheba’s husband Uriah, the Hittite, to be killed in battle – it was murder. David then married Bathsheba. The child that they had died as God’s judgement. But later they had Solomon, who became King of Israel.

So why does Matthew mention these 4 women? Luke has a genealogy of Jesus too – but it is all male. So why these 4 women in Matthew’s genealogy? What do they have in common? Why include them?

All these situations reflect human brokenness – that is overcome in highly unusual, highly unconventional circumstances. We can see that in these fractured, precarious and often tragic situations, God through these highly courageous women does *highly unexpected things* to overcome human tragedy, human brokenness – so that the people of Israel have a future, and so as to prepare for Jesus’ birth.

Tamar is a widow twice over, and then abandoned by her father-in-law. Rahab is a prostitute in a city that is about to be conquered. Ruth is a widow, apparently without hope. Bathsheba is sinned-against by David. All in hopeless situations, sinning or sinned-against. Ignored, broken.

Who would have thought that Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba would become part of Jesus’ family tree? Yet in each case, through these brave women, God is redeeming difficult or terrible situations – often caused by the men in the stories! Or God is overturning the results of sin and making a righteous way forward out of calamity or human sin. And God is even involving non-Jews – Rahab and Ruth are not Israelites – and probably Bathsheba isn’t an Israelite either. God turns outsiders into insiders!

And these are remarkably courageous women. Tamar is ingenious and courageously takes on Judah, the head of the family. Rahab defies the major of the city of Jericho. Ruth and Naomi are bold and ingenious in overcoming their situation. Later in life, Bathsheba is a key figure in Solomon becoming king. These are courageous women who overcome brokenness.

God is doing unexpected things. God brings great good out of great evil or harm. And God includes these outsiders, these non-Jews – in the lineage of Jesus. God overcomes brokenness... God redeems tragic or difficult situations. In each case, God works God’s purposes out through these situations of brokenness and tragedy and grief, through these courageous women.

And of course, that is exactly what happens for Mary. With Mary, God is doing the most unexpected thing! Mary conceives before she has had sex with Joseph. She conceives through the power of the Holy Spirit in what we call 'the virgin birth'. This is to show the absolute new-ness of Jesus – that he is not conceived in the normal way, but is conceived via a new creative act of the Holy Spirit.

But this is really tricky for Mary!! In the culture of the time, this made her an unmarried mother – scorned, rejected. Joseph is about to dismiss Mary for being unfaithful, but an angel reveals to Joseph that the pregnancy is caused by the Holy Spirit. Joseph does not send her away, but rather because of God's instructions, makes good this potentially really difficult, really damaging situation.

So Mary is like these other 4 women – courageous in a difficult situation. Tamar, Rehab, Ruth and Bathsheba are prototypes for Mary. God redeems all these really tricky, really difficult situations.

These 5 women are in Jesus' family tree – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. These really broken situations are brought up into the purposes of God.

But did you notice that there are two men who are highlighted more than all the others in the genealogy too.

In v1 we read: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, *the son of David, the son of Abraham.*"

v2: Abraham was the father of Isaac.

v6: And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah

v17: So all the generations from *Abraham to David* are fourteen generations; and from *David* to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

So Abraham and David are mentioned at the beginning, and as markers at the end – 14 generations from Abraham to David. ... And Abraham and David are mentioned again as the list goes through. So why this great emphasis on Abraham and David?

These two men might seem like great heroes of the faith. Is that why they are highlighted? We'll no. In this context, let me suggest that they are not heroes at all. This is a genealogy. It's about families – about having descendants. Both Abraham and David have a decidedly chequered past in this regard.

Remember that Abraham and Sarah had great difficulty having children. Abraham and Sarah were barren. In Gen 17, God speaks of a covenant between God and Abraham and says "You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations." Then God says this to Abraham about Sarah: "I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

But Abraham then says to himself (Gen 17:17): "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" So all of these promises are too late for Abraham – he and Sarah are past the age of having

children!¹ And yet they do have Isaac – but only after a very special visit by three strangers, who clearly are God’s agents.

With regard to David, Matthew’s genealogy says “And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah”. This is to recall *one of David’s great sins* – his adultery with Bathsheba. I’ve already spoken of the story of David’s lust for Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah.

So these are the two men who are mentioned three times in the genealogy. Abraham who could not have a child without God’s very special help! He is not the sort of person who would be a leader in a patriarchal society, where heirs were so important! He couldn’t have a son! And David, who sins terribly in this area.

These are highly imperfect men. Highly problematic men. One cannot reproduce and the other reproduces too much!

Again, remember this is a patriarchal male-dominated society. The typical macho-male, the typical alpha male demonstrates strength and virility. What matters in such a society is being a strong male – and at heart that is about being strongest and having children to perpetuate the family line.

Both are problematic in this area. Neither Abraham nor David are typical macho-males who demonstrate strength and virility. They are not strong, alpha males who get it all right, who are bold and masculine. They get it wrong, they are weak. They are either too old to have children, or sin terribly in this area.

And yet they are taken up into Jesus’ genealogy too! Imperfect, problematic men. Phew! This is encouraging indeed. God uses even these sorts of men. Actually, this redefines what it is to be a man in God’s Kingdom. Masculinity isn’t about being an alpha male.

And they are prototypes for Joseph. He *could* reject Mary – it will seem to the world that she has been unfaithful to him, which casts a shadow on Joseph’s masculinity. But actually Joseph must breathe in, and *accept* a challenge to his masculinity – that this child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And if that looks like he has failed, or is imperfect or inadequate – then so be it. His ancestors Abraham and David were like that too! They weren’t heroic alpha males in the world’s eyes – and neither is Joseph. But Abraham and David were still taken up into Jesus’ genealogy, and redeemed through that.

So this genealogy hopefully speaks to us all. Certainly, God does prepare for the Messiah, Jesus, to be born. But God has done so in strange ways!!

We might think that Jesus’ genealogy would be like that of the kings and queens of England – their family charts are full of heroic, royal figures, conquerors, powerful men and women who glide through history. Noble figures in fine clothes!

¹ Note [Gen 18:12](#) So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” Sarah’s childlessness is not blamed on her completely.

But Jesus' genealogy isn't about heroic, powerful figures. Its about women in broken and tragic situations. Its about men who are marginal, imperfect, problematic males – who have great problems. Who are not very 'masculine' at all.

Jesus takes these problems and these people up into his family tree and redeems them. The genealogy is not the stuff of heroes, but of villains. Not the stuff of triumphal leaders, but of marred and problematic people – people like me who get it wrong, who blow it, who mess up, who get caught up in really difficult situations. Yet these people are celebrated here as whakapapa! They are part of who Jesus is.

For God uses problematic and broken people. That's what God is like! That's what this birth story is about. Its not about glitz and money and food, about power and success. Its about God doing highly surprising things, through highly surprising people. Its about God turning the world upside down – in order for us to see that upside down is actually the right side up!

What we celebrate today is Hope – we celebrate that in Jesus, God takes up *our* problems and *our* brokenness, our fractured world, and here and now God uses us for his wonderful purposes.

But I want to give the final word to these five women. They faced broken, tragic situations. They faced these situations with ingenuity and with great courage. God calls for those features in God's people today. May we, like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary be people of courage in our world. Yes, we too are broken people, people caught up in tragedy and difficulty. But through the power of the same Spirit who caused Mary to conceive Jesus, may we too be courageous people of faith. May we be part of the story of Hope that we celebrate today!

To the glory of God.
Amen.