

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 29 DECEMBER 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Matthew 1:1-18; Psalm 72

“Family!”

Over the last week, most, if not all of us, will have experienced some of the positives, as well as some of the negatives, of family relationships and dynamics. Hopefully most of our Christmas family gatherings have been full of warmth, but undoubtedly most, if not all of us, will have encountered some tension, irritation and frustration here and there. Not all family is likeable and loveable, just because they are family. And some can be really trying if you have to get on with them for a couple of hours on a day where there is nothing much else to distract you from what makes them difficult to live with at other times of the year.

There may be families where everyone loves everyone else in continuous happiness and bliss, but I haven't come across many in the course of my career as a minister.

In the way Matthew begins his gospel, it is made clear that this was no different for Jesus. According to the account Matthew gives, there were more than a few shady, irritable, easily combustible characters in Jesus' family. Hotheads, liars, cheats, adulterers, harlots, strumpets and even murderers; a number of which you would definitely not invite to a Christmas or New Year's Eve party if you had any choice in the matter.

But before we come to that, first something about gospel writing:

The gospel is a uniquely Christian invention, somewhere between a biography, a history and a proclamation of a message. It's more than the telling of the story of a hero, more than the recounting of important historic events. It is also more than a message proclaimed to the benefit and edification of the listener. It is all of that, and more. It is an invitation to become a participant; a participant in the ongoing journey of the main character, Jesus. An invitation to become part of the history that God in Jesus is part of. An invitation to not only accept the message it proclaims, but also become actively involved in expanding its radius. An invitation to become part of a lifestyle, a community, a dream encompassing past, present and future, here, now and forever, for the individual listener and his or her whole community.

Gospels are writings with a program, a purpose, a goal that lies way beyond their immediate content.

To achieve this purpose, to activate the program in its readers, in every gospel there is an intricate, complex interplay of various sets of story lines, themes and narrative structuring that tell the story of Jesus, but at the same time also convey a message that goes way beyond the story. Every word, every phrase, every image serves the ultimate goal of inviting readers to become new or better participants, put together with very careful consideration.

Every word, every phrase counted, and not only because the content was considered to be precious and important, but also because every phrase, every word and every letter was a precious investment of money and time. Gospels were unimaginably expensive to produce! With no word processors, tipp-ex, note sheets, or draft versions, the authors made sure they thought through the structure and message of their story very well before they put pen to paper, and that every word counted at least once and preferably multiple times in the conveying of their message.

It is difficult to understand how that worked. How whole works were conceived without the possibility of working with notes and draft versions. But judging from the works that still remain, we know that intricate, complex writings of a high literary standard were nevertheless achieved.

It is difficult to put a price on it, but we know that at the time the gospels were written, a complete Old Testament would have been valued at about 150,000 denarii. With an unskilled worker or common soldier earning about 1 denarius a day, this would be the equivalent of millions in today's money. A gospel is of course a lot shorter than the whole Old Testament. By using cheaper parchment (one of the explanations why we have none of the original manuscripts today) and cramming in more words per page, it would, presumably have been possible to bring the price down. But it would still have been something you'd put a lot of thought and care into before sitting down to write. Commissioning or owning a book at the time the gospels were conceived involved serious money, comparable with the commissioning or collecting of fine art in today's world. If you didn't have that money, you could not afford to write a book, and writing anything, including a book, involved a significant investment.

Why this long(ish) introduction? Because I think it is important to realise, before we start thinking about today's (and next week's) texts, that it is highly unlikely there are any words in the writings of scripture that have been slipped in by accident or that are superfluous. It also justifies preaching on only one verse this week.

Paper at the time, writing at the time, was simply too expensive for anyone to be able to afford random, leisurely, unfocussed writing, or to be careless with their words, unless they were extremely wealthy. And as far as we know, although there were some wealthy benefactors, at the time the gospels were conceived, such extreme wealth was either rare or non-existent in the Early Christian Movement (for more on this topic, read Peter Brown's "Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD", a fascinating book on money and wealth in the first few centuries of Christianity).

There was no such thing as doodling at the time!

We can safely assume that Matthew, when he started his gospel with a genealogy, did not do so just because he wanted to fill a few pages with some difficult to pronounce names, most of which would have been, even at the time of writing, fairly unfamiliar to most of his readers. Instead, we can be sure that behind every name must lie a world of intention, designed to set the tone for what is to follow.

Biographies in antiquity often started with genealogies, providing the reader with a background and context for the hero they were about, but Matthew's is more extensive than most. Also, only two of the four gospels have a genealogy for Jesus, Matthew and Luke. Matthew's is twice as long as Luke's and in a much more prominent position. Where Matthew starts his gospel with the genealogy, Luke only comes up with it towards the end of chapter 3. So it is more than likely that this genealogy was important for Matthew, and therefore important for the understanding of the message he tries to convey about Jesus through his gospel.

Today we will look at the first sentence of this genealogy, letting the rest of the chapter wait until next week. The sentence: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham". There is already more than one sermon worth, even in those few words.

To begin with, the word genealogy in English is a translation here of the Greek word "genesis", and a very clear reference to Genesis 2:4 and 5:1, where the same Greek word is used as a translation of the Hebrew word, "toledot". The word Genesis comes from the Greek "geneo", which means becoming, coming into being, whereas toledot means generations, beginnings, an orderly sequence, pointing to something far more complex and meaningful than just the recounting of a list of forebears.

This start echoes the beginning of the gospel of John, who quotes the first verse of Genesis 1 in his gospel: "In the beginning".

The word translated with "account" in English is the Greek word "biblios" that can mean both account or book. It could refer to the list that is to follow, but is more likely referring to the whole gospel.

Staying closer to the Greek, we could then translate those first few words more accurately as the book about the becoming, the generating, the making of Jesus Christ. Or what led to Jesus (becoming) the Christ.

The first two qualifications of Jesus are that he is a Son of David, and a Son of Abraham.

Now I need to tell you a few things about sonship in those days. There were two kinds of father/son relationships. The biological and the legal, with the legal, if push came to shove, taking precedence over the biological. Or, to put it differently, to be someone's son could mean there was a biological relationship. It could, however, easily refer to a legal relationship that was considered even more valid and important than the biological one.

This is very important to keep in mind when we read the genealogy that is to follow later on. But for now, the first thing Matthew tells us is that Jesus, the main character of his book, is a son of David and a Son of Abraham. To the first readers, that would not necessarily have said anything about biological ties as yet, but everything about the recognition of communal characteristics and shared legal claims.

Son of David. Son of the King that stood at the cradle of Israel as a nation, a righteous King, a shepherd for his people, a pious, God fearing redeemer, save only for the matter of Uriah the Hittite, as it says in 1 Kings 15:5.

Son of David, which also means he was closely related to, a brother, of Solomon, the king who had gone down in history as a wise man, a powerful healer, exorcist and magician. Solomon the King, who built the first temple, and brought great wealth and prosperity to his people. Both David and Solomon were archetypes of the Messiah in the Davidic line that many believed would finally produce the promised Messiah.

Son of David, but also, Son of Abraham. Son of the father of all believers, of the man who walked with God and in whose offspring God had promised all the nations would be blessed. If David is the personification of Israel, with Abraham, all the nations enter into the text. Abraham, the person where God's promises first take shape; dreamer, visionary friend of God. Brother then also of Isaac, also son of Abraham. The only son, put on the wood to be sacrificed by his father, carrying that wood on his own shoulders to the place of sacrifice, in the wilderness, up a mountain. Saved by the divine grace and mercy of God.

Even in those first three word pairs the associations tumble over each other and a whole world opens up for the reader who is prepared to hear the echoes, and see the glimmers, of past, present and future they represent. Not only the whole history of God with Israel is here, but the history of God with all the nations. Abraham, David, and their sons, Israel and the world, individuals as well as whole communities journeying with God, encompassed in these few words. It's all there to be unfolded in even more detail in what is to follow.

It recognises that the present and the future have deep roots in the past; that God's journey with his people is full of parallels and references that reach a long way back; indicating that there is a purpose, a plan, a pattern to be discerned, archetypes to be discovered, a journey to be continued.

For the young Christian movement in Matthew's day, this was important. To show that Jesus had connections that reached deep into the past. That he was not just a fad, a nine-day wonder, but part of a venerable, long, historic pattern of relationships of God with his people.

For us it offers the opportunity to understand the man Jesus, and what he became in context. Jesus did not come out of nowhere, He was not just a one off, a freak of history and humanity, but he is part of a long line of divine involvement and interactions with humanity.

We are invited to become part of a line, a history, through following Jesus and becoming part of the message the gospel conveys. As we shall see next week, Matthew very cleverly writes the Church, those who come after Jesus, into the line, the becoming, the making of this son of David, and his Kingdom. It makes us, makes the church, part of the toledot, the generating that has been part of God's order and God's journey with the world from the beginning, from the days of Abraham and David the King, to the days of Jesus, the Christ and beyond.

A beautiful message to close to on New Year's Eve, don't you think?

We follow a Messiah whose connections go a long way back. In his story, we hear echoes of many others who lived the faith. Abraham, Isaac, David and Solomon for starters, are part of our "becoming", our "generations", our "making". A becoming, a making, a begetting, that continues to the present day wherever Jesus is recognised and served as Christ. A work in progress that has been in the making from the first chapters of Genesis, and is still in the making, through and in us. The making of a Kingdom, a world, a future, where Abraham's faith, Isaac's trust, David's Kingship and Solomon's wisdom combine in the rule of Jesus, as he has become known to us through the gospels. Amen.