

1. It's a royal birth - Bringing the wonderful reign of God's Messiah

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[0 : 00] I want us to think a little about this intriguing beginning to Matthew's Gospel. And I want to do it in three parts this morning. We'll sing some more carols as we go along.

What is Matthew telling us in this long list of unpronounceable names? By the way, I thought I could have had a round of applause for that, just like the singers, don't you think? Ian and Claire were glad I didn't give them that one to read.

What is Matthew saying to us? Well, first of all, he's telling us that this royal birth is the climax of a wonderful story. It does seem a rather odd way to begin a book, doesn't it?

If you get a biography in your Christmas stocking and you start to read it, as I'm sure perhaps some of us will, you would expect, wouldn't you, to get something about, well, at least the subject's parents, possibly even their grandparents.

But you'd be quite surprised, wouldn't you, if you've got 42 generations on the first chapter of that biography. So why on earth do we have all of that laid out here? Well, of course, the answer is because Matthew's not writing us a simple biography.

[1 : 08] He's writing us a gospel. And it's not just a story that he's writing in this book of his, 28 chapters. It's a story with a message, a very clear message about God and his salvation.

And by laying out these generations in this way, he's telling us very clearly two things. First of all, he's saying that this is a story that's rooted in history.

He's telling us that Christianity is not something that just emerges out of myth and mystery, like so many of the mystic religions of our world, especially the Eastern religions.

Now, he is telling us this is a historical faith. The Christian faith stands or falls on its historicity. It claims to be true truth.

That's why in Luke's gospel, in just the same way, in the familiar stories we read in Luke chapter 2, we'll read some of them this evening, Luke makes the point about the historical nature of Jesus' birth so clearly.

[2 : 12] He was born in the reign of Herod, in the time of Caesar Augustus, when a decree went out from Quirinius, the governor of Syria. All of these historical, verifiable, datable figures.

And similarly, this genealogy roots the person of Jesus Christ and his whole story in history. But secondly, it's not just any old history.

It's a story that Matthew roots for us also in Scripture. That is, he roots it in the history, not just of humanity, but in the history of God's saving plan for his people.

That's not something new, not at all. He's telling us this is a continuity. It's a continuation of a story that's been going right from the very beginning of God's story with his people.

The story of the people that God promised to Abraham in that first reading that we had this morning. The story of the people that God blessed abundantly under the reign of great David and his dynasty.

[3 : 19] In fact, Matthew is telling us that in Jesus Christ and his coming is the climax of that whole story stretching back to the very, very beginning of God's first word of revelation to human beings.

Here's how the book of Hebrews puts it. Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken to us in his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things and through whom he also created the world.

And that's why we have this great long family tree right at the beginning of the gospel story. Because names carry such huge meaning. It's strange for us, isn't it?

Because names in our world don't tend to mean very much. They're just names that we like and we choose. When we have a new baby, we choose a name. I hope Ewan and Helen have chosen a name now. They seem to have taken an awful long time about it.

They have at last? Anna? Elizabeth? Yes. Well, there we are. They've chosen a name. And we're rejoicing with Ewan and Helen in their birth. But names in and of themselves don't convey a huge amount of meaning to us.

[4 : 35] I suppose it's still there in nicknames, isn't it? I've got a good friend I used to share a flat with and his nickname in the flat was Fat Boy. So that tells you he's not a slim chap. Terry McCutcheon, by the way, when he used to do quite a bit of amateur boxing, he had a nickname.

Do you know what it was? Picasso. Picasso. Because he spent so much time on the canvas. Is that right, Terry?

There's something for your Christmas cracker this year. Nicknames still convey a little bit of meaning to us. But in many cultures, the names and the genealogies convey a huge amount of meaning.

Some of us here are from the islands, from the Hebrides, and you would testify to that. Somebody said to me recently that their Gaelic name, the name that they're known by on the island of Harris, tells people who they are and where they came from, what their family did and what they do.

It places you in the story of the island, the story of the community. And in many cultures, that is still the case. And genealogies are very, very important.

[5 : 54] And that's why we have this genealogy here. It tells people who this person being born was and where he came from. And, above all, what he came to do.

So, it's not just a boring old list of names. It's a very, very important family tree. And it's a royal family tree.

When I was on holiday in the summer, we visited the monument at Glenfinnan, where the Jacobite uprising began. And on the wall there, there's a great long family tree of all the House of Stuart, showing you exactly where Charles Edward Stuart came and why he had a claim to the Scottish throne.

If you go to the Tower of London, you'll find similarly a great family tree showing you where our present queen came from. And you'll look at that family tree to find who our future kings and queens are going to be.

And what Matthew gives us here in these verses is exactly that. It's a royal family tree. And it tells us that Jesus Christ is the king who belongs to the climax of the story of God for his people.

[7 : 13] And it tells us that the climax of this wonderful story culminates in the coming of God's wonderful Messiah, his king, his great leader.

Do pick up your Bibles again. And I want to think, secondly, about how the climax of this wonderful story arrives in the coming of God's wonderful Messiah.

Who is he? Where does he come from? What will he do? Well, that's what these verses tell us. And it's all there, really, in the very first verse.

Look at it. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. It's actually the only time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus receives that full title, Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah.

And he's explaining to us what that means by linking him immediately with these very, very important two names.

[8 : 19] David and Abraham. And you'll see the whole genealogy is structured around these names to emphasize these vital connections. From Abraham to David, verse 6.

Notice David the king. Then from verse 6 through to verse 11. From David to the exile. All these other lists of kings.

None of them called the king. David is the king. And then from the exile to Christ at verse 16. By the way, that explains why Matthew's genealogy is a little bit different from the one in Luke chapter 3.

Matthew's emphasizing the legal royal line of descent, which can sometimes be different from the bloodline. And like most genealogies in the Bible, he doesn't list every single name.

He misses out some generations. But it's to emphasize the connection between these two names. That's what genealogies do. They're not there in the Bible so that we can make some effort to sort of count up the exact number of years or things like that.

[9 : 25] They're there to convey a clear message about identity and about origin. So he structures this genealogy so we cannot miss what he's saying.

This person who's being born is the son of David. He's the son of Abraham. What's the point that he's making? Well, obviously two things.

Two things about who Jesus is and about what he came to do. First is, he is the king. He is the anointed one. The Messiah. The king. The son of David.

At last. That we read of in that great promise from Nathan to David. From the Lord. About the kingdom that would outlast the son and the ruler who would reign forever and ever over all the world.

He is the one, says Matthew, who will rule over all nations. Who will conquer all evil. All injustice. All that is wrong in the world of human beings forever and ever.

[10 : 27] This is he. At last, in this royal line of David, in this royal birth, great David's greatest son is born.

God's Christ. His wonderful Messiah is come. As promised in the law. And as the prophets also longed for and spoke of.

The child of Isaiah that you know so well from Christmas readings. The son upon whose shoulder the government would be forever. Whose name would be called Wonderful Counselor.

Mighty God. The Eternal Father. The Prince of Peace. Who would sit on the throne of David and of his kingdom forever. To establish it and uphold it in justice and with righteousness.

From this time forth said Isaiah and forevermore. He's the one that the prophets spoke of. He's the one that all the faithful in Israel were longing for and waiting for.

[11 : 26] When you read in Luke chapter 1 about the faithful ones like Zechariah and Elizabeth. Like Simeon and Anna. We're told they were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. They were longing for the consolation of Israel.

In the coming of God's Messiah. The Son of God. The King in David's line. And now says Matthew in the first verse of his gospel. That's the one who's come.

Chapter 21 of his gospel as you know you have a beautiful picture of Jesus riding into Jerusalem the capital city on a donkey and all the people were crying out Hosanna to the Son of David.

Here is our King as promised coming to us. And he's not just the answer to Israel's needs but he is the answer to the needs of this whole wide world.

Psalms 72 sang of this great king in his coming. May his name endure forever said the psalmist. May people be blessed in him and may all nations call him blessed.

[12 : 37] Not just the people of Israel the Jews. And in this birth friends Matthew is telling us is the answer the ultimate answer to all the evil in this whole wide world.

He is the one who will bring peace. He is the one who will bring righteousness and justice and a reversal of all that is wrong not just to Israel but to all nations.

Jesus. And that's very clear in the message of the second name that he's given here. Not just the son of David says Matthew but the son of Abraham.

He is the saviour in whom all the nations of the world will be blessed. Because in him also is the answer to all the evils in the human heart of man.

Remember that reading that Claire read to us from Genesis? Go back later on and read the whole of the book of Genesis from the beginning. You'll see it so clearly. After God's wonderful creation in Genesis chapter 1 and 2 we have the disaster don't we of man's rebellion.

[13 : 49] Turning their back upon God and his rule. Turning to self-rule. To living without God indeed against God. And what's the result? Well if you read Genesis 3 and 4 and 5 and 6 and 7 and so on you will see it is an avalanche a catastrophe of ever worsening sin and evil spilling out of the hearts of human beings and into the society the world and everything round about.

Comes to a head and it's epitomized in Genesis chapter 11 isn't it? With the revolt of human beings the great self-aggrandizement of man building that tower of Babel saying we will rule ourselves we will be gods in heaven we will be the ones who decide everything.

Humankind united in that great human project of self-rule and self-aggrandizement. And so it's been ever since but like all delusions it always leads to disaster.

we've seen that with all the Babel projects that have happened ever since. Every great mighty empire that has reached for the sky and thought it was invincible every single one has come tumbling down into the dust of history and that will happen to every great empire that does that still today.

Where is the Roman Empire? Where is the great Greek civilization? Where is the great Marxist project? Where is the third Reich? Where in a hundred years time will be the great European project of today?

[15 : 35] The great globalization? The world of man the world that we live in is in a mess. We all know that. But the Bible tells us it's in a mess because the heart of man is in revolt against God.

sinful and it's selfish right to the core. That's the explanation of our world. But God's answer to that problem lay in his promise to that one man Abraham all those centuries ago.

That there would be at last salvation and blessing for every nation through his seed. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you and I will be their God he said.

And the whole of the Old Testament story is the story of the unfolding of that promise. The promise of ultimate salvation from sin. And now says Matthew at the beginning of his gospel that Saviour has come.

Not only an anointed king in David's line but a Saviour the seed of Abraham to bless all the nations of the world. That's why in verse 21 the verse we begin our service with when the angel speaks to Joseph about the child to be born he says you'll call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

[17 : 04] But his people according to God's promise to Abraham his people will be drawn from all the families of the earth. Not just from the natural seed of Abraham from the Jews from Israel but salvation through Christ to all who believe in him.

Paul the Apostle says to the Galatians for if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed heirs according to promise. And in the coming to Israel of Israel's wonderful Messiah is the climax of God's wonderful story for them.

In his coming comes the one who will bring peace ultimate peace and righteousness for this whole wide world because he and he alone is the one who can bring peace in the human heart.

Peace and reconciliation with the God that we have sinned against and rejected. The sacred year says the hymn has now revolved accepted of the Lord when heaven's high promise is fulfilled and Israel is restored.

Our glad hosannas prince of peace they welcome and proclaim and heaven's exalted arches ring with thy most honored name.

[18 : 32] We're going to pause again and sing that song that begins with these words Hark the glad sound the saviour comes. Climax of a wonderful story in the coming of a wonderful saviour and king.

But there is something else crying out to us in this extraordinary opening to Matthew's gospel that I don't want us to miss as we hurry through to get on to the action in the rest of the chapter because these verses are also full of wonderful messages about the comfort of our wonderful God.

Tell us three things I think at least about our God, the God of Abraham and David, a God who is now made known to us fully and completely in the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, he's a God of unassailable promise. This genealogy tells us that our God is a God who keeps his word.

Despite people's failures, despite their manifest unfaithfulness, he is unswervingly faithful to his covenant promises in every detail from the first until the very last, despite all his people's failure and rebellion and rejection that almost every page of the history of the Old Testament testifies to.

[19 : 58] Read that story. Read the parts of the Old Testament associated with the names here. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's a story of waywardness, of sinners, of schemers, of failures.

Read the story of God's people as a whole. They constantly, constantly failed to be the people that God called them to be. A light to the nations, a people bringing praise to the name of Almighty God.

The people failed, the kings failed, even David and Solomon who were the pinnacle really of the great era of the kings. Certainly the rest of all that motley crew whose names we read there in verses 7 to 11.

That's why God sent them ultimately into exile. They brought upon themselves the curses of God's covenant through their sheer rebellion and wickedness and disobedience.

Just as all human beings have brought upon ourselves the penalty of our rebellion against God. God gave them over says Paul in Romans chapter 1 to our own self rule.

[21 : 11] What was the result? We're a people full of envy and murder and strife and deceit and on and on that list goes in Romans 1. A people foolish and faithless and heartless and ruthless.

Just open your Sunday paper today you'll see that's true. Isn't that the world that we know? A faithless world, a world full of broken promises, broken national treaties, broken trade agreements.

That's what leads to conflicts and wars in our world, isn't it? Broken personal covenants that lead to so much misery and broken marriages and families and relationships in our world.

Broken government pledges and promises leading people all over the world to be so disillusioned and so distrusting of their politicians.

A whole world where you can't really trust anyone. That's the root, isn't it, of the credit crisis that we're in. Credit comes from the Latin word credere, which means I trust. I lend you some money and I trust you'll give it back.

[22 : 23] But banks and governments and bond traders and companies can't trust anybody to give them the money back that they're lending them, can they? We can't trust anybody hardly in this world to be faithful, to deliver on those promises.

Can't even trust the Bank of England to deliver on the promise of what's on your five-pound note because this time next year it'll only be worth four-pines ninety-five. But our God shows us in the coming of Jesus that he is a God of unassailable promise.

What he promises, he always delivers. You can really trust him. He was true to his word and history was all under his control and he was rolling it all out exactly according to plan.

Abraham to David, it's under control according to plan, fourteen generations. David to the exile, it's all unraveling. No, it's not. It's under control.

Exodus to the Christ. Days of darkness and depression and despair and we think God has left us or God has died. But it was under control.

[23 : 41] His promises are unassailable. Do you sometimes doubt that God will do all that he's promised? That he really will one day bring all wars to cease?

That he really will usher in a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness? That he really will in your heart and in mine at last transform us to the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ himself in all his holiness and beauty and his everlasting living bodily resurrection?

Do you doubt that God will one day at last really liberate us from this great exile and separation from him that comes from our own mortality and our sin?

Do you sometimes doubt that? Well, no doubt during the many, many days and years and centuries of Israel's history represented by this list of names, believing people, trusting people did harbor doubts.

Of course they did. Will God keep his covenant promises? Will he really send his great Messiah King? After all that we have done, after all that we have really done to abuse him and reject him and fail him, could he still keep that promise?

[25 : 08] He did. And Jesus came. And just so, through all our days of waiting and darkness and wandering, his promise to come again, to reign forever and to usher in his kingdom of glory and light is absolutely unassailable.

You sometimes wonder if you'll get through the rest of the week, let alone the rest of your life, firmly trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Where is God?

Why is he not acting? Why is he not answering my prayer? Why is this situation that I'm struggling with not being alleviated? Friends, you can trust this God.

His promises are unassailable. That's what the birth of Jesus reminds us this Christmas. But second, this list of names also reminds us that our God is a God of undeniable power.

He's powerful against all the odds to accomplish everything that he does promise. Just think about what these names tell us about some of the obstacles that faced God's promised Messiah.

[26 : 25] Think of the weakness that he had to overcome, the weakness at the individual level. What about Abraham, over a hundred years old, and Sarah, his wife, ninety-nine, and utterly barren all he years.

And yet God promised the child and he delivered a child. Think of David. his problems were really at the opposite extreme, weren't they?

He was rather hyper-sexed and over-fertile. He was a man of blood and war, a man of adultery, a man of murder. And yet God promised him, from his own body, a seed and an eternal dynasty.

And what he promised, he delivered. Think of the weakness at the national level of Israel. It has to be said, really, that Israel was, as a nation, a disaster.

That's emphasized here, isn't it, in the prominence given to the exile. The exile spoke of Israel's total failure, total rebellion, absolute disastrous reversal of everything God had called them to be.

[27 : 36] And the bitter, bitter judgment that followed that in the exile seemed to everybody that this was absolutely the end. But it wasn't the end.

God's power kept a remnant by his grace. He kept that royal line preserved, despite all the disasters of those years, the genocidal attempts and the rain in the time of Esther, and every other disaster that befell his people.

His undeniable power at work to overcome every human weakness and sin and evil and everything everything to accomplish his purpose.

Think of the weakness even in the events of the incarnation itself. Look at the carefulness of verse 16.

Joseph is Mary's husband, we're told that, but not Jesus' father. One theologian put it this way, the man, as the specific agent of action in history, must retreat into the background as a powerless figure in Joseph.

[28 : 48] Man is utterly helpless from beginning to end to sort out the mess in this world and the mess in our own hearts. But God's power is undeniably present and able to do even that.

He can do and he has done what we could never ever do for ourselves or for anybody else. He has brought salvation from sin. He's brought the hope of the future.

And friends, that means that you can rely on God and his power to keep you right till the very end. You need reminded of that sometimes? I do. This God has power to overcome all the natural weakness and all the sin and all the rebellion in the heart of human beings, including in your life and in mine.

He's got the power to save you from the past and to direct you in the present and to keep you until the very, very end.

When you know a God like that, you don't have to fear anything, do you? He's a God of undeniable power and that power is at work through Jesus Christ in and for the people that he loves.

[30 : 14] But finally, and perhaps most wonderfully of all, this genealogy reminds us that our God is a God of the most unlikely people. You notice how he makes a special point of highlighting the grace and mercy of God who delights to draw into his family people from the most unlikely background, the most unlikely outsiders, tarnished by sin and by defilement and by estrangement.

I wonder if you noticed the four women's name in this genealogy, apart from Mary that is. That's unusual enough in genealogies in the Bible.

It's not unique, but it is unusual. But it's all the more unusual when you see who these women were. Because it's not Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel, the wives of the great patriarchs, is it?

No, it's not. They're all outsiders. They're all Gentiles. They're all pagans. Verse 3, there's Tamar, the Canaanite, the wife of Judah's son.

And verse 5, there's Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho. Verse 5 again, there's Ruth, the Moabite, the great enemies of Israel. And then there's Bathsheba, the Hittite, in verse 8, who was Uriah's wife.

[31 : 33] Not only were they all pagan women, they were all, we might say, rather shady characters, in a sense. They were tainted by sin and by scandal, weren't they? Tamar's son was born out of incest with her husband's father, Judah.

Read about that dreadful story in Genesis 38. Rahab, as we know, was the harlot of Jericho. Ruth was a Moabitess and almost certainly was at least under suspicion of seducing away the man Boaz.

Bathsheba, of course, was the woman with whom David committed adultery and then murdered her husband. Don't you find it astonishing that God draws these not only into his covenant family, his people, but into the very family tree of the Messiah so that their blood ran in his own vein.

You see, from the beginning, this God, the God of Scripture, is a God who loves to draw into his family the most unlikely people. Gentiles, pagans, here, like most of us.

Sinners, like all of us. And sexual sinners, like many of us, in fact and in act and all of us, certainly in mind. Messed up people who can't do anything to change themselves.

[33 : 04] But by the power of God and through the promise of God, fulfilled at last in Jesus Christ, these all are brought in to the people of God.

Friends, if you see what this list of names is telling us about our God, it's telling us that you can find acceptance with this God.

Even though you think you're an outsider. Even though you think that you are somehow disqualified, you are somehow unworthy, you could never be part of the family of God himself.

Yes, you can. You can come in. And God brings people like that in all the time. From the very beginning of history.

Right into his own family to find acceptance and belonging and identity and purpose and a future. God and more than that, in drawing you in to his marvelous family, he can shape your life and make it part of his great ongoing story of salvation.

[34 : 23] He can give you a role to play as they played in his great salvation. not preparing for the birth of the Messiah, but now preparing for the coming again of the King of Glory to rule over all nations and to gather with him all his unlikely people to reign with him.

The very end of Matthew's Gospel tells us that there's a place for everyone in Christ's family to go and to welcome others into that family and to proclaim the Gospel to the very ends of the earth.

He invites us in to his family and shares with us the joy of being part of his family and takes us out with him to invite others to come in and to share that joy as well.

What's so special about Jesus' birth? Well, it's the climax of a wonderful story, the greatest story ever told about the coming of a wonderful Savior and Messiah who brings to all who will have him of all the nations of the earth the comfort of a wonderful, wonderful God.

A God of unassailable promise who can trust him utterly. A God of undeniable power who can rely on him utterly and forever. And a God, praise be, of the most unlikely people who can all find acceptance with this God forever.

[36 : 05] All I can say is that at this Christmas I am so glad that this God is my God. And I hope you are too. And if as yet he's not, I hope that you will find him or rather that you will be found by him this Christmas.

And praise him along with all of us who have come to know him and love him and trust him and rely on him forever. Amen. Let's pray.

Gracious God, how we thank you for your faithfulness to your glorious promise of salvation, for your power to bring about all that you have promised, Christ, and for your wonderful comforting presence with us now and forever in the Lord Jesus Christ and calling out to us to join the joy of your family of love.

May every one of us, we pray, know that joy this Christmas time, for we ask it in his name. Amen.