

New beginnings

What's the best way to begin a New Year? The easy answer for those of us here this morning is "by coming to church." With January 1st falling on a Sunday this year, it gives us the perfect moment to make our New Year resolutions: pray more, read the bible, come to church, be more like Jesus. More generally, whether Christian or not, New Year is a time for making resolutions: lose weight, exercise more, give up chocolate, become teetotal. But, being honest, how many of these resolutions last until the end of January, never mind for the whole year?

It struck me last night when we were on the ramparts of Stirling Castle at the Hogmanay ceilidh and fireworks display, as a nation or race we are much better at celebrating endings rather than beginnings. Hogmanay is more about seeing out the old (drowning it out, perhaps?) and less about making provision or plans for what lies ahead. We enjoy it, revel in it even, but we wake up in the morning and wonder what comes next: some things may hang over (one word or two) from the night or year just past, but we haven't actually made concrete plans for what lies ahead. Hastily made resolutions just don't fill this void. Something more substantial: visions and dreams, plans and strategies, pathways to growth or managed decline – these are the kind of things we need, but seldom get around to. Before we know it another New Year opportunity has passed us by.

Perhaps it would help if we saw our lives as a novel that we are in the process of writing. We need to establish the setting, the key themes, the characters and the story line. As we are already part way through the story, some of these are givens, but there is ample room to develop them in the year or years ahead. How would we like the story to unfold? This makes a richer recipe for life than a simple set of resolutions that are noted only in the breach: I'd encourage you to try it today.

You will find examples of this way of thinking in Scottish Methodists Together, in particular the section on "My Journey of Faith" in which individuals chart their on-going journey. Have a look at this quarter's issue if you haven't already done so, to read about the faith journey of Julya Walsh, a Local Preacher from Dundee. This might give you a template for your own story. Look carefully at the graphics and you will see that this is a journey that continues off the page – the next chapter is yet to be written, and the story can still be shaped by the decisions Julya is making now, perhaps especially at the start of a New Year. Just as importantly, the

journey starts off the other side of the page – what is to be said about its beginning depends to a large extent on where the journey eventually ends up. It's not that birth or childhood or early encounters with faith are changed by what happens later, but their significance may only be revealed much later on. The whole story, event and meaning, significance and purpose, can only be truly appreciated through the lens of history.

This, of course, is true not just of our own lives but also of the child whose birth we celebrated a week ago. The stories about Jesus, his life and the significance thereof, came to be written long after his death. In our bibles four such stories, or gospels, are included, each with a slightly different slant on the meaning, significance and purpose of Jesus. And, dependent on those overlapping but different perceptions of who Jesus was, each of the story-tellers chose to begin the gospel in a different way. The beginnings of Matthew's gospel we rarely bother with, but today I want us to spend a little while trying to understand what he was trying to tell us in the long and complicated genealogy of Jesus.

To start with I want to point out three simple things, all so obvious that we may in fact have overlooked them:

- There was no need for a genealogy at all. Mark and John both manage very nicely without it, just as they manage very nicely without any of the birth narratives.
- The genealogy could have been put somewhere else. Starting with a list of ancestors is about as good a way to kill a story as I can think of. If you felt it had to be included why not place it in an appendix or, as Luke chose to do, insert it after a few chapters of rather more riveting action?
- There were many different possible genealogies to choose from, so why did Matthew choose this one? Matthew cites 42 generations, and in each one he could trace Jesus ancestors through either the mother or the father, which gives a total of over 40 trillion possible family trees. Luke, it may be noted, gives a different one, which merges in parts and diverges in other parts, and even suggests a different father for Joseph.

So, we need to ask ourselves why did Matthew choose this particular family tree, and why did he choose to place it here, right at the start of his gospel? He must have thought that it helped to illuminate the story that he was about to tell, that it was in some way significant as a prelude to what follows. More precisely the genealogy forms a preface to the introduction which is the birth

narrative itself, together making what Borg and Crossan call a “parabolic overture”, in other words an introduction to the main themes of Jesus’s life story told by means of a parable. And if you want to delve a little deeper into what I can only touch upon this morning, I’d encourage you to read their excellent book *The First Christmas*¹.

Once we step beyond the concept of genealogy as a boring list of names, the most obvious thing about Matthew’s list is that it is in three parts. The first sentence tells us this is:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

After which Matthew lists Jesus’ forebears in three sections, and ends with another summary sentence:

So all the generations from Abraham to David were 14 generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon were 14 generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ were 14 generations.

Clearly Matthew wants to emphasize these break-points in the family tree, even to the point of manipulating the maths – if you look carefully, there are in fact only 13 generations in the first and third sections, but Matthew presents them as 14 generations in order to produce perfect symmetry. The point surely is that if, after each previous set of 14 generations God has acted decisively in the history of the Jewish people, so also God may be expected to act in and through the person of Jesus. By this genealogical method Matthew implies, right at the start of his gospel, that the person about whom he is writing is at least as great as Abraham and David – the Father figure and the King in whose succession the Messiah was believed to come.

The second interesting thing about this list is the fact that Matthew traces the family tree from David through Solomon (i.e. the kingly line of succession) rather than through Nathan (the prophetic line that Luke describes). This may seem like a minor point, but it prefigures the emphasis in Matthew’s gospel on Jesus as King of the Jews. Herod immediately recognizes this position as a rival which provokes his anger and the slaughter of the innocents in an attempt to kill Jesus. The title “King of the Jews” was one that the Roman Emperor conferred on Herod as a puppet king. In presenting Jesus as King of the Jews, Matthew is making a powerful and pointedly anti-

¹ “The First Christmas”, Marcus Borg & John Crossan, (London, SPCK, 2008)

Roman statement, and the shadow of Roman imperial execution hangs over much of the gospel, leading ultimately to his death under another Roman appointed ruler, Pontius Pilate. Pilate, of course, famously also asks Jesus “Are you the King of Jews?”, the phrase being a replica of that used by Herod during the birth narrative, and one that is all the more significant because it appears nowhere else in the gospel.

So, the specific genealogy chosen by Matthew indicates that God was working through the birth of this child, and that the authority of Rome would be challenged by this child who was the rightful King of the Jews. But there is one further, strange detail in the genealogy – **I wonder if you spotted it?**

Although, in the nature of a patriarchal society, Matthew traces Jesus ancestry through the male line, nevertheless at five points in the list of names he mentions women. First, there is Tamar who was actually Judah’s daughter-in-law but ended up having his children; then there is Rahab a Canaanite prostitute; thirdly Ruth, a Moabite who accompanies her mother to Israel on the death of both their husbands, and seduces Boaz on her mother’s instructions; then there is Bathsheba who committed adultery with David; and finally there is Mary. Why does Matthew take care to mention these five women and why no others?

I think there are two possible ways of answering that question:

- There is, shall we say, something irregular in the marital affairs of all five women. It’s as if the family tree has a kink in it at these points, and some arboreal engineering is required to keep the line intact. To Matthew’s readers this may have been proof that the genealogy is divinely inspired; to us it may be more persuasive in reassuring us that however contorted or difficult our family structures may be, they can still be deeply blessed by God.
- We encounter the number 5 in many different ways in the parabolic overture to Matthew’s gospel. As well as these 5 women, the first two chapters of Matthew contain 5 mentions of Jesus as the Messiah, refer 5 times to Bethlehem as the place of the birth, include 5 divine messages in the form of dreams, and demonstrate the fulfillment of 5 Old Testament prophecies. This is more than co-incidence, but **what is the significance of the number 5?**

It is the number of books in the Torah or Pentateuch – the books of the Law that God gave to Moses. And, of course, we find echoes of this theme throughout the gospel, most obviously the typology in

Matthew's birth narrative of Jesus as the new Moses (e.g. the slaughter of the innocents mirrors Pharaoh's decree at the birth of Moses), and the emphasis in Matthew on the Sermon on the Mount as the new, improved version of the Law.

A genealogy may seem to be a tedious and unlikely way to start a best seller. But by beginning in this way, Matthew actually manages to introduce his main claims about Jesus subtly and immediately: Jesus was the God-given one to challenge Roman imperial power and to re-invigorate the Law for the Jewish people. These themes are then expanded parabolically in the birth narratives, and fleshed out in the details of Jesus' ministry, culminating in his trial and execution as King of the Jews.

In short, Matthew follows advice my mother used to give me: start as you mean to go on. And, come to think of it, that might be a good theme for a New Year's Day sermon. But I'll leave that for now, perhaps for 2017 - the next time 1st January is a Sunday.

Wallacestone Methodist Church,
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