

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 62:1-5; Ps 89 (88); Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Matthew 1:1-25

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

Matt 1:1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Matt 1:2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, 4 and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 5 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 6 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 7 and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 8 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 9 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 10 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 11 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 12 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

Matt 1:12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

Matt 1:17 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.

Matt 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There is no doubt that the (optional) genealogy is disconcerting for the modern reader/listener. Nevertheless, by means of it, Matthew thought it important to embed the story of Jesus in the story of God's first chosen people. It is likely that Matthew's community had just broken away from "the synagogue." At the same time, this community claimed to be in continuity with God's past disclosure to the Jewish people, now brought to completion in Jesus the Messiah. In particular, the figure of Moses dominates Matthew's presentation of Jesus.

KIND OF WRITING

There are two kinds of writing, genealo-

Thought for the day

Tracing origins has always been of interest and nowadays it is possible to have a sample of your DNA tested to find out what kind of genetic mix you are. It can lead to surprises! Jesus also had shadows in his genealogy, as is normal. There is hope, too, in the ancestors: God can write straight with our crooked lines. The shadows are not simply in our past, somehow in others, but in each of us as well. But the great message of the Gospel is that our past does not always have to stalk us—there is total forgiveness and even amnesia in God: *I, I am the one who blots out your rebellious deeds for my sake; your sins I do not remember.* (Isa 43:25)

Prayer

Help us to accept from you, God, a new name, a new reality in Christ that we may know your forgiveness and love and be set free from our past sins and faults. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

gy and annunciation. The annunciation type story shows this pattern:

1. appearance of an angel;
2. fear and/or prostration;
3. reassurance ("do not fear");
4. message;
5. objection;
6. a sign is given.

The pattern is familiar from the OT (*Ishmael* Gen 16:7-12, *Isaac* 17:1-21; 18:1-12; *Samson* Jdg 13:3-21) but is only partially present here.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The broad Old Testament story is presented schematically using the device of fourteen generations, taking us for Abraham, through David and the Exile to the time of Jesus. Evidently, people were unaware in antiquity of ovulation. As a result, women were omitted from genealogies; this means that to include women is especially significant.

Tamar: Genesis 38
Rahab: Joshua 2-6

Ruth: the Book of Ruth
Wife of Uriah (Bethsheba): 2 Sam 11-12

All four are in some sense irregular, either sexually and/or as foreigners. They prepare for the great “irregularity” of the virginal conception and look forward, at the same time, to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the new covenant in Jesus. Sinners likeness have a role in God’s plan: three of women are technically sinners but so are lots of the men, such as David himself and Solomon.

(i) Joseph: the name Joseph reminds the aware bible reader of another Joseph in the book of Genesis.

(ii) Divorce was allowed by inference in Deut 24:1-4, although no biblical legislation formally permits it.

(iii) Son of David: the relationship with David immediately calls to mind the guarantee and promise to the house of David made by the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 7 and the prayer version of it in Psalm 89.

(iv) Jesus is the Greek for Joshua, the name of Moses’ successor, who actually led the people into the promised land. The name comes Hebrew/Aramaic and means “YHWH is salvation” or “YHWH saves/has saved.”

(v) The promise in Isaiah 7:14 is read as a messianic prophecy. In its original context, this text promised a successor to King Ahaz, born in the normal way.

(vi) Communication in a dream: the clear prototypes are Jacob (and his famous ladder) and Joseph (with the coat of many colours).

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:16–20)

ST PAUL

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the

law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Rom 4:16–17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Because of the extended Old Testament background, only selected verses will be commented.

Verse 1 The first verse anticipates the three-fold pattern, pointing to Jesus.

Verse 6 People did look back on the time of David as a sort of golden age and many hopes were expressed using davidic imagery from the Psalms.

Verse 11 The Babylonian Exile was a watershed in the history and imagination of the Jewish people. It will be referred to again in the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2:17-18.

Verse 16 The pairing of a later Jacob with the later Joseph intentionally echoes the great patriarch, the father of the twelve sons of Jacob / twelve tribes of Israel.

Verse 17 The writer insistently draws our attention to the pattern of fourteen. The consonants of the name David had the numerical value of fourteen.

Verse 18 Mary was not descended from all these people but Joseph, as the legal father of Jesus, was. Betrothal was almost marriage; it is fitting, therefore, to talk of divorce. The virginal conception is found also in Luke’s account.

Verse 20 Do not be afraid is a key element in the Annunciation type-scene.

Verse 21 As explained above the name Jesus means YHWH saves. In antiquity, names were regarded as key to the person’s identity and mission (“nomen omen”).

Verses 22-23 Matthew peppers his account with fulfilment citations, of which this is the first. Originally, Is 7:14 (in Hebrew) meant that a wife in the royal family would have a baby in the usual way. Matthew choose the Greek OT (LXX) which speaks of a virgin conceiving, but again in the usual way. God-with-us will have a long echo in the Gospel.

Verses 24-25 Joseph is always obedient (and silent) in Matthew 1-2.

Thus we learn that Jesus is descendent of David, he will save the people from their sins and will be God-with-us.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Every family tree contains shadows, shadows which can overshadow later generations. What have you learned about yourself from your family history?

2. In the narrative, Joseph faces a very challenging situation with a combination of kindness and logic, only to have both sent aside by the surprise of God. Have you had that experience too?

3. God-with-us is a powerful expression, inviting me to reflect on my own experience of God with me in my life. Can I name any important moments of God’s presence?

4. Every birth is a blessing—even my own! Am I still a blessing to those around me?

PRAYER

God of Abraham and Sarah, of David and his descendants, unwearied is your love for us and steadfast is your covenant; wonderful beyond words is your gift of the Saviour, born of the Virgin Mary.

Count us among the people in whom you delight, and by this night’s marriage of earth and heaven draw all generations into the embrace of your love.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 62:1-5

Our reading is poetry, very uplifting poetry from Isaiah. Does the energy touch me? Does the imagery speak to me?

SECOND READING

Acts 13:16-17, 22-25

King David is referred to extensively in the New Testament, as is evident also in this short reading? Why David? At the time, he was a symbol of God’s presence through time to the Jewish people.

GOSPEL

Matthew 1:1-25

The genealogy is very mixed — and so is everyone’s! We move from the familiar to the unfamiliar as we hear how Jesus came to be born.

John said: I am not he. No, but one is coming after me

Acts 13:16 So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: “You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen. 17 The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. 18 *For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.* 19 *After he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance* 20 *for about four hundred fifty years. After that he gave them judges until the time of the prophet Samuel.* 21 *Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kīsh, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years.* 22 When he had removed him, he made David their king. In his testimony about him he said, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.’ 23 Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised; 24 before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And as John was finishing his work, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.’

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This unexpected and yet appropriate reading from the Acts of the Apostles places both John the Baptist and Jesus in the context of Israelite history. The mention of John the vigil mass of Christmas resumes his role in time of Advent and, at the same time, makes a bridge between Advent and the feast of Christmas.

KIND OF WRITING

Fully fifty percent of the Acts of the Apostles is made up sermons, discourses and letters. For example, speeches are given by Stephen, Cornelius, James, Gamaliel, Demetrius, Tertullus and Festus. In addition, Peter makes eight speeches, while Paul makes no fewer than nine (Acts 13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:22-31; 20:18-35; 22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:2-23, 25-27; 27:21-26; 28:17-20). While the speeches and sermons are adapted to the occasion and characters, we are really hearing Luke’s theology of history here. In the history writing of the time, it was up to the author to place appropriate speeches on the lips of the

protagonists. As this is the very first of Paul’s speeches, the first time we hear his “voice”, it is some way foundational and especially important.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

There are three large issues at stake here.

(i) John the Baptist was a continued source anxiety even for so late Gospel as Luke’s. The evangelist goes to great trouble to “locate” him in Luke 1-2 and to make sure we see him as the fore-runner of Jesus.

(ii) The figure of David—a symbol of God’s faithful across time to the people of Israel—was important for early Christianity and, evidently, for Jesus himself. Not only are we supposed to recall 2 Samuel 7, but also David was seen as the author of the Psalms. In that capacity, early Christianity saw him as a prophet, foreseeing the time of the Messiah.

(iii) The Gospel of Luke may have been written at a time when some Christians were rejecting the roots of Gospel in Judaism. Later in the second century, Marcion challenged the use of Old Testament—he may have been the first but he was certainly not the last! The evangelist is very concerned, in both the Gospel and the Acts, to show continuity as a symbol of God’s faithfulness.

RELATED PASSAGES

‘My friends, the prophecy in scripture, which the Holy Spirit uttered concerning Judas through the mouth of *David*, was bound to come true (Acts 1:16)

Again, that he raised him from the dead, never to be subjected to corruption, he declares in these words: “I will give you the blessings promised to *David*, holy and sure.” (Acts 13:34)

As for *David*, when he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, he died and was gathered to his fathers, and suffered corruption. (Acts 13:36)

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. (2 Sam 7:11-12)

Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun. (Ps 89:35-36)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Paul addresses two distinct groups: fellow Jews and “god fearers”, that is, Gentiles attracted to Judaism. Such a group is known from archaeology and they may have been drawn to Judaism on account of its pure monotheism, high ethics and noble antiquity.

Verse 17 Paul cannot tell the story of Jesus without reference to the central story of Pentateuch, the Exodus. The use of the third person (they) is revealing about the time of writing.

Verses 18-21 These verses are omitted for reasons of brevity but are essential for the coherence of the whole story.

Verse 22 Paul is made to abbreviate the familiar and wonderful story of the search for a successor to Saul. David is praised extravagantly: *a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.*

Verse 23 The promise takes us back to 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89 (see above).

Verse 24 This is a summary of both Luke 1-2 and Luke 3:1-17.

Verse 25 This fits with the way Luke has timed the baptism of Jesus in his Gospel: Luke 3:19-21. It is made clear for the nth time John is not the Messiah.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Each of us has a story but it is never just our own. On the contrary, we are part of a stream, a continuity. My story too is embedded in the Christian story, itself embedded in the story of Israel.

2. God wants all of us to be people “after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.” What do I do to make my heart transparent to the will of God?

3. The sense of preparation and excitement is tangible as Christmas comes around. What are my hopes this year?

PRAYER

May we feel this year, O Lord, the passion and longing of John the Baptist and so prepare ourselves to mark the birth of Jesus, son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Your God shall rejoice over you!

- Isa 62:1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
- 2 The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
- 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
- 4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.
- 5 For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your builder marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Readings open with a passage full of joy and hope, very suitable for the season. It is not quite unfettered happiness but at the same time it is a thrilling reading. The Psalm going with the reading joins uplifting vision of Isaiah with more traditional hopes rooted in God's faithfulness to David and his dynasty. The Psalm, as a result, rather than the Isaiah reading, sets up the imagery which will be important for both the Acts and Matthew.

KIND OF WRITING

Isaiah 62 is a prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem, which really runs from 61:10 until 62:12. Our excerpts shows clearly the use of "twin lines" or parallelism, so much part of biblical poetry.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Our passage is taken from Third Isaiah and was written most likely in the years after the return from Exile, following the arrival of Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC. Hopes were high after the exiles came back but the reconstruction was frustratingly slow. Accordingly, the prophet gives a great message of hope, to encourage the despondent. Some of the pain is found even in this happy poem: forsaken and desolate. It is evident that much remained to be achieved.

The reading is, nevertheless, very fitting for the vigil Mass of Christmas on account of the tone of expectation combined with sheer joy, tipping over into

the exuberant.

RELATED PASSAGES

Indeed, the LORD will call you back like a wife who has been abandoned and suffers from depression, like a young wife when she has been rejected," says your God. (Isa 54:6)

The LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken." (Isa 62:11-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1a The prophet is unable to keep silent. The parallel lines are uneasily synonymous: Zion is part of Jerusalem; keep silent becomes rest.

Verse 1b Note how vindication and salvation are in parallel. At dawn, the day has broken, but the burning torch suggests it is still night. So, not quite there yet!

Verse 2a The parallel lines shift now from vindication to glory, that is the public acknowledgement of God's action.

Verse 2b In the culture, a change of name is a change of being or relationship ("nomen omen"). The parallelism is interrupted to give the origin of the new name: God himself. Cf. *One will say, 'I belong to the LORD,' and another will use the name 'Jacob.' One will write on his hand, 'The*

LORD's,' and use the name 'Israel.'" (Isa 44:5)

Verse 3 Royal symbolism is used, facilitating the change of focus in the Psalm to David.

Verse 4a The true feelings and experiences of the listeners come to expression. Cf. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." (Isa 49:14). For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. (Isa 54:6)

Verse 4b-c V. 4a is turned around and robustly positive language is used. Cf. *I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.* (Isa 65:19) 4b is "activated" so to speak in 4c. It is not just a change of name but a change of reality, of being, of heart.

Verse 5a The parallelism is evident. Why builder? A more literal translation runs as follows: *As a youth espouses a maiden, Your sons shall espouse you* (Isa 62:5 JPS translation). The word "son" is related to the word "to build." Respecting the parallelism, evidently, the New Jerusalem translates thus: *Like a young man marrying a virgin, your rebuilder will wed you, and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice in you.* (Isa 62:5).

Verse 5b This is an uncommon and unexpected metaphor. It reminds one of Ps 19: In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. (Ps 19:4-5)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We do not often think of God as "rejoicing", much less rejoicing over us or even over me. We touch the heart of the incarnation: *We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.* (1 John 1:4)

2. Not being able to hold it in was also the experience of Jeremiah. Do I feel any such "compulsion" to let other into the secret?

PRAYER

God, truly you rejoice in yourself, in your cosmos and even in each one of us. Teach us to live by such conviction that our faith may be truly alive and that others may be drawn to life abundant. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.