

The Mothers of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Great to be in church with you this morning. If I haven't met you before, my name's Steve. I'm a senior pastor at St. Paul's, and I chose that Bible reading.

And well done, James, wherever you are. I've got a confession to make. Right from the very beginning of the show, I have been an avid fan of The Simpsons.

So I've been an avid fan for over two decades. And I think that they are probably the sharpest cultural critics that America has ever produced.

So I watch it for the intellectual content. But one of my favorite episodes is the episode where Homer Simpson eats the blowfish, or at least part of the blowfish.

And they thought that he'd eaten the poisonous part of the blowfish. And he had a certain amount of hours before he was going to die. And so he quickly comes up with a bucket list of everything that he wanted to do in life.

[1 : 1 3] And he spends the day sort of, you know, really racing around, doing all this sort of thing really quickly. And then he gets to the end of the day, and he's still got some time before he dies.

And so he grabs an old Walkman. This is how long ago the episode was. He puts a recording of the Bible into it and starts listening to the Bible.

That's what you do when you've got nothing else to do, and you're about to die, apparently. And so he gets to the bits in the Bible where it is the judgment of God. He fast forwards through the judgment of God bits.

And then he gets to the genealogies, and it goes, you know, so-and-so beget so-and-so. So he fast forwards that bit, and then it comes up, and so-and-so beget so-and-so. And he fast forwards it again, and so-and-so beget so-and-so.

Then he just, and so-and-so beget so-and-so. So, and you're tempted to do the same.

[2 : 1 1] I mean, I resonate with that. When it comes to the book of Numbers, there's this list of names and names. You just go, okay, I'm just going to fast forward beyond that bit and get to the meaty stuff.

When in actual fact, you know, for most of us, when it comes to the birth of Jesus, we begin at verse 18 of Matthew chapter 1. And I wonder, why did Matthew include this list of names?

This year, we are looking at Christmas through the eyes of those who are in the Christmas event for the first time. And today, our focus is on the mothers of Jesus, and how the mothers of Jesus reveal the meaning of Christmas.

And so there's three things. If you're someone who's writing stuff down, you've got a notepad in front of you. There are three things from this list of names that I want us to see this morning.

Number one, Christmas is good news, not good advice.

Secondly, Christmas turns our values upside down. And thirdly, Christmas is the promise of ultimate rest.

[3 : 1 9] They're the three things. So firstly, Christmas is good news, not good advice. Notice when Matthew, if you've got your Bibles open, be really good, because you're going to need it this morning, as you will every Sunday.

But Matthew chapter 1, I'd like to have a look at these lists here of the names, because I think it's really important. Notice it doesn't begin with once upon a time.

That's how fairy tales and legends and myths begin. You see, once upon a time sends the signal that this probably didn't happen.

That's how I tell stories, you know, all this one time. It probably didn't happen. Matthew begins, this is the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

So Matthew grounds who Jesus is and what he does in history. Jesus is not a metaphor.

[4 : 28] He is real. The biblical accounts of Christmas are about what happened in history. The birth of the son of God into this world is therefore a gospel.

It is good news. It is an announcement of good news that proclaims to the whole kingdom. And so the birth accounts of Jesus are not telling us what we should do, but what God has done in history for us.

Jesus is described here as the Messiah, the son of Abraham. You see, centuries earlier than this, God made a promise to a bloke named Abraham that all the people of the world will be blessed through him.

Through a descendant of Abraham, God would reverse the devastating impact of sin for all time and eternity.

And Matthew declares in the opening words of his gospel that that time has come in Jesus.

[5 : 45] That's what makes this news good. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation.

You see, the heart of the Christian gospel is that you do not save yourself. That's what makes this good news. God came to save us in the person of Jesus on that very first Christmas.

And so Christmas tells us that Jesus and Christianity are unique. See, I would suggest that other religions and philosophies of life are good advice.

You see, the founders of the great religions say in one way or another, in various forms, I am here to show you the way to spiritual reality.

Do all of this, whatever it is that I suggest you do, and you will find it. You see, that's advice. And some of it is helpful advice.

[6 : 50] But nevertheless, it is still advice. Christianity is not primarily about self-improvement. We begin with Jesus, not by adopting an ethic, even adopting the ethic of love your neighbor as yourself.

We don't begin with Jesus by turning over a new leaf or by joining a community. We begin by believing the report about what has happened in history.

Did God really become a human being? Did Jesus really live and suffer and die for us?

Did he really rise triumphant over death? So firstly, Christmas shows us that Christianity is not good advice.

It is good news. It is a pronouncement for all. Secondly, we see here that Christmas turns all of our values upside down.

[7 : 55] We live in this country in an individualistic culture where we commend ourselves through performance and accomplishments.

And that's not how it operated in the first century in the Middle East. In the first century Middle East, a much more of a collective society, a traditional society, a family tree operated like your resume.

It was, that is, your heritage, your clan, your family, your pedigree constituted your resume.

And as we do nowadays, where people adjust their resumes to leave out the parts that they might find a little embarrassing or a little less impressive, we do it in funerals as well.

We tend to leave out more the bad details of someone's life and focus on the positive stuff. We tend to always put our best foot forward, whether it be our resume or our eulogies.

[9 : 05] We know that they did exactly the same in the first century when it came to their family trees. We know for a fact in history that King Herod, Herod the Great, eliminated, literally, but also many names from his public genealogy because he did not want anyone to know that they were connected to him by family.

He wiped them out. Took them out of the public records. Took them out of the public records.

To the family, he was Uncle George. Uncle George was a convicted criminal. He had been executed by electric chair for murder in the United States.

And the biographer assured the children that he would be able to handle the situation so that there would be no embarrassment to the family. And so when it came to the bit in the biography about Uncle George, he wrote this.

Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties and his death came as a real shock to everyone.

[10 : 45] You see, we tend to cover up the skeletons that we all have in our closet and put our best foot forward.

We do it. The reason we do it is because we suspect people will value us less if they know the true us.

That's why we do it. That's why we put our best on a Sunday, which is so ironic. This is the place where we should not do it. We think they will value us less if they knew us warts and all, as we say. And Matthew does the exact opposite with Jesus. The exact opposite. And it helps us to see that God's value system is so different.

So first of all, I want you to look at this list of names. And notice firstly that there are five women listed here. They are all, if you like, the mothers of Jesus. They're all in Jesus' family tree.

[11:51] See, what's unusual about this is that in ancient patriarchal societies, as it was in the Middle East in the first century, a woman was virtually never named in a list like this, unless they were literally a sitting queen.

Virtually never named, let alone to put five of them in, is highly unusual. In first century Palestine, women were gender outsiders.

They had no legal rights. They couldn't inherit property. And they weren't allowed to give testimony in a court. And yet, they are named here in Jesus' genealogy.

And what's more, three of them are Gentiles. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.

And to the ancient Jew, who's the first recipient of this genealogy, they were regarded as unclean.

[13:01] Why would you mention them at all? And they were also racial and religious outsiders.

And yet, Matthew deliberately includes them in the family tree of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. And by deliberately including them, Matthew recalls some of the most sordid and nasty and immoral occasions in the Bible.

It says in verse 3 that Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah and the mother was Tamar. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law and she tricked him into having a sordid relationship late one night. It was an act that was against the law of God. And even though Jesus is a descendant of Perez and not Zerah, Matthew includes both of them in the family tree.

Why does he include both of them? Because Matthew wants us to remember the details of the sordid affair. That's why. The saviour of the world came into this world, into a family like all of yours.

[14:34] Dysfunctional. And mine too. Dysfunctional family. Remember Rahab? Mentioned in verse 5.

She wasn't just a Canaanite, a Gentile, she was also a prostitute. But the most interesting story is in verse 6. It mentions King David. Royalty in the family line.

And you go, well, that's got to be good. That's one up for the resume. Except in one of the most, I think one of the greatest and ironic understatements of the Bible.

Matthew adds that David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife. Her name was Bathsheba. She's not even mentioned by name here.

Such was the details. And by not naming her and mentioning her first husband Uriah instead by name, Matthew is calling us to remember this tragic and terrible chapter in Israel's history.

[15:42] Before he was king, David was a fugitive running for his life from King Saul. And a group of all the nation of Israel, only a group of 37 loyal men went on the run with David.

They sacrificed their lives for David. They were willing to give up everything for David. And they wanted to protect him as the future king of Israel.

And in 2 Samuel 23, we know that Uriah was one of those 37. And when David was finally made king years later, he sees Uriah's wife.

He wants her. He took her. She got pregnant. And then he arranged to have Uriah killed in order to marry her. Another dysfunctional family.

And it was out of this dysfunctional family and this deeply flawed human being that the saviour of the world came.

[16:55] This list of names includes moral outsiders and cultural outsiders and racial outsiders and gender outsiders. And rather than being excluded, rather than being covered up, rather than coming up with an Uncle George story or doing a King Herod and putting white out on the history, Matthew unveils it.

Publicly acknowledges this is the ancestry of Jesus. It's such an unusual genealogy.

Why include it when he didn't have to? Well, there's one verse in the Bible. There's many, but there's one verse in the Bible that gives us a really significant clue.

2 Corinthians 5.21. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That is, the saviour of the world jumped right into the middle of the sinful, sordid, evil, unjust affairs of human existence in order to rescue us out of it.

[18 : 12] He identifies with our weakness and our brokenness and our sinfulness in order to rescue us from it. And so the Christian message is that if you repent and you believe in Jesus Christ, his grace covers all of your sin and unites us with him in his saving work.

And so there's not a single great individual who doesn't need his grace. And there's not a single rotten individual who can fail to receive the grace of the Lord Jesus.

You see, all the gifts that we receive at Christmas are symbols of the greatest gift of all, God's grace to us in Jesus. And yet some gifts that we receive in a couple of days will appear to have no point to them whatsoever.

They're generally the Kris Kringle kind of gifts. You get those ones. Imagine, you know, you've got a gift from a friend under the tree right now.

You open it on Christmas Day. And it's a book titled, Ten Easy Steps to Lose Weight. You're offended.

[19 : 45] You put it down. But you're not as offended as the next gift that you get from your spouse. It's another book called Overcoming Selfishness.

Now, if you say, thank you for those gifts, there's a sense where you're admitting that you are overweight and obnoxious at the same time.

You've got to kind of wrestle with that. So to receive some gifts is to admit flaws, to admit weaknesses, and that you need help.

And the message of Christmas, the message of Christianity is that there has never been a gift offered, never a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths the gift of Jesus Christ requires us to do.

Christmas means that we are so lost, so unable to save ourselves, that nothing less than the death of the Son of God Himself could save us.

[21 : 01] And to accept the true Christmas gift, we have to admit that we are sinners, that we are unworthy of the gift and in need of being saved by His gracious gift to us.

And that, unfortunately, is a descent that is much lower than any of us, many of us, are willing to go. You see, Christmas totally humbles us because it proclaims that nothing less than the death of the Son of God can rescue us.

And yet Christmas also affirms us because He was willing to do it for us. The greatness of Jesus is seen in how far down He came to love us and to lift us up.

And so Christmas turns all of our values on their head. God isn't attracted by our impressive resumes. He's not attracted by our religious performance or our moralistic performance.

The only way to get God's approval is by acknowledging our brokenness, our sin, our frailty, our flaws, and our desperate need for the gift of Jesus and His mercy to us.

[22 : 31] So thirdly, if we accept that gift, Jesus' grace gives us ultimate rest. Now, if you've got the list of names in front of you, there is an obscure verse right at the end of the list in verse 17.

It says, Now, for us, and I'm assuming most of us here, if not all of us, have got no Jewish heritage at all.

So for most of us who don't have a Jewish heritage, that doesn't mean a whole lot. But for the Jewish person who first received this from Matthew, this is significant news.

See, in the Bible, the number seven is a very significant number. Right at the very beginning of the Bible, God did the work of creating in six days. And it says that on the seventh day, He rested from all of His work.

That's not because He was like you and me and tired after six days of work. Rest simply means that He enjoyed all of His creation.

[23 : 48] He enjoyed the perfection of everything that He made. Everything was perfect and in order. And the seventh day was never meant to an end. That is, you don't get to the end of the seventh day.

You don't get to the creation account. It says, and there was morning and night. And then the eighth day came and we're back to Monday and we're done to do it all again. That is, the seventh day is the high point of all of God's creative work.

It's the goal of His creative work. But then sin entered the picture. And the first people decided to reject God's loving rule over their life. They chose for themselves how they thought that life should work and how they're going to live their life.

God, you take a back seat. I'm going to take it from here. And this rest was destroyed. There was no longer harmony and peace.

And the world in which we live is a classic picture of that. And yet God still graciously provided for His people. He instituted a seventh day rest as part of their normal weekly cycle.

[24 : 58] But He also instituted this thing that was designed to be an ultimate rest. It was called in the Old Testament the year of Jubilee.

At the end of the last year of the seventh period of seven years. So take a seven year period and add it by seven times a day.

That is the 49th year. It saw the beginning of the year of Jubilee. And every Israelite looked forward to the year of Jubilee.

The year began on the day of fresh beginnings. When the whole nation had just received forgiveness for their sin. And the year of Jubilee was characterized by freedom and return.

You were set free from burdens. And labor and debt were to go hand in hand with restoring broken family ties. And repossession of lost families.

[26 : 01] It was a year of all debts being wiped clean and returning. Clean slate. And the year of Jubilee meant that the people of Israel just kept looking forward to the 49th year.

They just looked forward to the year of Jubilee. Every 49 years they knew that no matter what my circumstances, I was going to be set free. And verse 17 tells us that there were three lots of 14 generations or six lots of seven generations with Jesus as the beginning of the seventh seven. There's no more recording of generations after Jesus. Verse 17 is saying, No more counting of generations happened after him.

In him there was rest. Harmony, peace, hope, security can be found in him. And if we grasp that Christmas is not a once upon a time story, but that Jesus has broken into time and space, and that he has accomplished our salvation, so that prostitute and king are equal in his eyes, then you can have rest.

Then you can have rest. Now. Total, enduring, final rest is what every one of us needs. The rest that Jesus secures for us is a rest that we get to both enjoy now and forever with him.

[28 : 04] Jesus gives us rest for our souls right now. In fact, a little bit later on in Matthew chapter 11, he writes, Jesus says, Come to me, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. So many people today, there's books written all about this.

I have this deep hunger in the human heart. People are hungry for love, and hungry for security, and hungry for significance and meaning.

And Jesus says, I am the bread of life. Feed on me, and you will never hunger again. Many in our world are walking in darkness, and disillusionment, and despair, and confusion, and wondering what is the meaning and purpose of life.

And Jesus says, I am the light of the world, and if you follow me, you will never walk in darkness. Instead, you'll have the light of life. And virtually everyone is fearful of death.

[29 : 19] It makes a mockery of everything that we live for. And Jesus says, I am the resurrection of the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

And so Christmas declares that we can have rest in our souls right now, if we come to Jesus. The rest of unspoiled love between you and God.

What a gift to have this Christmas. You see, Christmas is not a once upon a time story, that shows us how we should live better lives.

Christmas is news. News calls us to acknowledge something. Something that has already happened, and to respond to it.

The saviour of the world has broken into time and space to save us. Christmas. This event is not so much a birth. It's not so much a birth that we're celebrating in two days or today.

[30 : 32] It's the coming of God into the world that we're celebrating. And so Christmas is good news, not good advice. Christmas turns our values on their head.

And Christmas is the promise of ultimate rest. And he calls us this Christmas to look to him, to come to him, to trust him, to believe him, to follow him, and find the rest that we all so desperately, desperately need in our hearts.
Amen.