



WHO IS THIS CHILD?

SERIES: ADVENT 2018

Matthew 1:1-17

First Message

Bernard Bell

December 2, 2018

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of the Church Year. For over 1500 years the Church has found it beneficial to follow an annual liturgical calendar. This calendar is anchored to two events: the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. The Church Year immerses us in the story of Jesus: the expectation of his coming, culminating in his birth; then his death, resurrection and ascension, and the gift of the Spirit. We, then, live out our lives in light of this story, in light of what God *has done* in Christ, and *is continuing to do* through his Spirit.

For over a thousand years, and still in many Orthodox churches today, this immersion in the story of Jesus goes beyond the text of Scripture and the liturgical calendar. It is enhanced by an iconographic program covering the church interior: mosaics or frescoes portraying significant events from Jesus' life, with special focus on his birth and on his death and resurrection.

We are not a liturgical church, but we do observe the calendar a couple of times: at Advent and Christmas, and again at Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Advent is about hope; this is especially so of this first Sunday. This *ought* to be a happy time of year, but so often it dissolves into stress and heartache, and *is* something quite different. For all the promise, we often experience disappointment and unmet expectations; a dissonance between what *ought to be* and what actually *is*. Dare we hope for a different outcome? Is there a "can be" beyond the disappointing "is"? Advent is about hope. It is about the possibility of moving from the "ought to be" through the "is" to the "can be."

This year we will take all four Sundays of Advent to consider the events associated with the birth of Jesus. Our guide will be Matthew. His nativity story (Matthew 1-2) divides into four sections. A convenient way to think of these sections is as four questions about this child who is born. *Who* is he? He is Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. *How* was he born? Though born from Mary, he is conceived from the Holy Spirit. *Where* was he born? In Bethlehem. *Whence* came he? Out of Egypt to Nazareth. In each case this is in fulfillment of the Scriptures, stated five times by Matthew. These are the four questions we will address in this Advent series.

So, I start with the first question, Who IS this child? The text for this first section is Matthew 1:1-17, a genealogy. This does not look like promising material. What hope can there be here? I will spare you a reading of this genealogy with its 94 names and 39 begets. But Matthew considered it important to begin his gospel with this genealogy. He begins,

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1 ESV)

Immediately we are back in the Old Testament with its many genealogies. Most of us find these Biblical genealogies boring and dull, so we skip over them. A genealogy is important for it establishes pedigree, legitimacy and inheritance.

Who is this child? He is Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Christ. Next week we'll see why he is given the name Jesus. What is his pedigree and legitimacy? He is both the son of David and the son of Abraham. To understand Jesus, then, we have to understand David and Abraham.

This genealogy thrusts us into a story, into Israel's story. Jesus was not Christian, he was Jewish. How then did we end up with the Aryan, blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus that hangs on so many walls all around the world? Three weeks ago was the eightieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, when Nazi storm troopers ransacked Jewish businesses throughout Germany. In response to this outrage, Marc Chagall painted *White Crucifixion*, to remind the world that the Christ, in whose name the Nazis were persecuting the Jews, was himself not Aryan but Jewish.

Jesus was Jewish, and he was born into Israel's story. Jesus must make sense within the Israel story. What is that story? Matthew distills Israel's story into three stages, turning on four key people or events:

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)

You can tell the story of Israel with just these four people and events: Abraham, David, the deportation to Babylon, and Jesus the Christ. It's a story with three movements, which can be represented on a diagram: up, down and flat. It's a story of promise and fulfillment, of loss and stagnation. The "ought to be," so full of promise, had become the "is," so full of loss. Was there any hope? Might there be a "can be" beyond the stagnation? Perhaps your story feels like this. Is there any hope in Advent for you?

Israel's story began with great promise; indeed, it began with a promise, God's promise to Abraham:

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:2-3)

God promised Abraham a seed: both a son and a great nation. He promised him his blessing, and that he would be a conduit for blessing others, indeed all nations. A few verses later God added the promise of a land (12:7). A people and a home! What a wonderful promise!

But there were a couple of obstacles. "Sarah was barren; she had no child" (11:30). How could she and Abraham have a son? And "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (12:6). How could Abraham take possession of this land? God gave Abraham a big promise, but there were seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the way about which Abraham could do nothing. How does one live in such circumstances? Abraham believed God; he took God at his word. He

gave his allegiance to God. He didn't know how God would work things out, but he accepted that that was God's role to figure out. His role was to be loyal and devoted to God. That's what faith is.

Israel's story began with promise, and those promises were realized, though it took a while. God did give Abraham and Sarah a son—after 25 years of waiting. He did give his descendants the land—after 400 years of waiting. In the meantime he sent them down into Egypt where he built them into a great nation. He brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He gave them a king, David, to whom he also gave a promise, and this promise also concerned a son. He would give David a son who would build him a temple, and whose kingdom he would establish forever. The promise to Abraham and son for a great nation and a home was supplemented by the promise to David and son of a temple and an eternal kingdom. David did have a son, Solomon, who did build a temple and reign as king. Under his reign all the promises were fulfilled. This stage of Israel's history was a story of promise and fulfillment.

Would that we could end the story at that point. But Israel did not stay at the top for long. Solomon's heart was quickly led astray by foreign women and their gods. He broke faith with the Lord. He ceased to be loyal and devoted. He gave his affections to others.

The second period of Israel's story, from David to the deportation to Babylon, was a period of decline and loss. There were a couple of upwards ticks, but the trajectory was downwards, until Israel was deported from Jerusalem to Babylon. The Lord expelled Israel from the land into which Abraham had entered and which the Lord had promised his descendants. This period was an undoing of the story. Why? The Biblical authors are quite clear: it was due to Israel's sin, her failure to keep faith, to remain loyal and devoted to the God who had called her to be his people. It looked as if Israel had come to nothing. All that remained was promise: God's promise to Abraham and God's promise to David. Through the prophets God told his people that though they were faithless, he remained faithful to these promises to Abraham and David. Advent is based upon these promises: there is hope! Hope is on the way! A "can be" lies beyond the "is."

The third stage, from the deportation to Babylon on, was like a flat line for Israel. There were a few fitful starts at recovery: some Jews did return to the land, where they did rebuild a temple in Jerusalem, but it was a pale shadow of Solomon's temple, and God's glory never returned. When Joseph was born the situation did not look promising. Most of the Jews lived outside the land. The land itself was under Roman occupation. But the promise remained. Godly Jews held on to that promise; they held on to the hope that God would come to save his people, that he really would be faithful to his purposes to Abraham and David.

Now Matthew has good news. With his genealogy he makes an important announcement: a fourth pivotal moment has come. The Christ has arrived. As son of David and son of Abraham he is the true locus of God's promises to those figures of old. And he will end the flat-line state under which God's people have languished since the deportation.

This is the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Our men have been studying the life of Abraham and will soon move on to the life of Jacob. The story of Abraham is told in the genealogical account of Terah, his father. The story of Jacob is told in the genealogical account of Isaac, his father. There are ten of these genealogical accounts in Genesis. Each one is named for the progenitor, for the person at the

beginning of the account. The account of Terah is not about Terah himself, but about what came forth from his loins, namely Abraham. But Matthew gives us the genealogy of Jesus Christ. This is named not for the person at the beginning, but for the person at the end; not for the people to whom promises were given, namely Abraham and David, but for the one in whom these promises are fulfilled. Jesus is the endpoint, the telos, the goal. He's the one towards whom all of this is pointing. The hopes and dreams of all the years are met in him. The question mark at the end of Israel's story receives its "Yes" in him.

Our Scripture reading was the account of the Road to Emmaus, where Jesus began with Moses and all the Prophets, and interpreted in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27). The Scriptures, by which is meant our Old Testament, point to Jesus. The "ought to be" of Israel has degenerated into the "is" of unfaithful Israel, but it can move into the "can be" in Christ, who is faithful Israel.

The Bible is a story of redemption. It is a story told in four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. This is the story portrayed in our window. In the beginning God created a world that was very good, and the climax of that creation was humanity in his image and likeness to be his representative presence in his very good world. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden, in his sanctuary, there to serve and to keep, to worship and to obey. He was to live by simple faith in God's word. His allegiance was to God. But Adam and Eve gave their allegiance to another; they listened to one who was not God; they broke faith and transferred their affections to another. And so they were expelled from the garden, from God's presence. But God embarked on a plan of redemption, promising a seed of the woman who would defeat the serpent. Israel had an important role to play in this plan. Israel was to be the new humanity, called to do what Adam had failed to do: live faithfully in the Lord's presence. But Israel also failed, and suffered the same fate: expulsion from God's presence. But the promises remained. God fulfilled his purposes for Israel when she birthed the Messiah in fulfillment of promise.

The story of redemption can also be told in four words: ought, is, can, will—what *ought* to be, what *is*, what *can* be, and what *will* be. These four words can be used on several different levels. For example, of the broad story of redemption. What *ought* to be: humans living lives of faithful obedience to God, remaining loyal and devoted to him, under his watchful gaze and presence. What *is*: humans breaking faith with God, giving their loyalty and devotion to that which is not God. What *can* be: there is hope that God remain faithful while humanity is faithless. Things can be different. God in Christ has drawn near, and bids us come to him. What *will* be: one day God will put all things right. His people shall serve him in complete freedom, as Adam was intended to do.

These four words can also be applied to Israel. What *ought* Israel to be: the new humanity, redeemed by God for a life of faithful obedience in freedom. What Israel *was*: she forsook the Lord and gave her affection to others. What Israel *could* be: God gave Israel hope. Yes, the tree was rotten, but from the rootstock he would raise up a new Branch, a righteous Branch, who would save his people. What Israel *will* be: all God's promises to Abraham and to David will be fulfilled through Christ in a great company of people, Jew and Gentile together, as the one people of God, over whom Christ reigns as the most benevolent of kings.

WHO IS THIS CHILD?

We are not yet done with the genealogy. There are some further surprises.

Five women are named in the genealogy. This is highly unusual for other genealogies consist only of men. Israel was patriarchal and it was patriarchal lineage that mattered. Not only is the presence of women surprising, but the particular women included are also surprising. If one were to include women in the lineage of Israel it would surely be the matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. But that's not who is included. Instead it's Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife. These are four marginalized women. Were they alive today they would be part of the #MeToo movement. They were at the mercy of powerful men. Tamar was cheated and mistreated by the men in her life: Judah and his three sons. She had to disguise herself as a sex worker to get any justice, and then Judah blithely applied completely different standards to his own behavior than to her behavior, a common problem still today. Rahab was a sex worker, living inside the wall of Jericho for easy access to all who entered and exited the city. Ruth was an immigrant, left vulnerable without any men in her life. Uriah's wife, who is not even given her name, fell prey to a sexual predator. But God incorporated these marginalized women into redemption history. They were used and abused by men but not overlooked by God. He did not forget them. He reversed their "ought-is" descent with an upward pull into the "can be" and "will be." The book of Ruth places both Ruth and Tamar alongside Rachel and Leah as builders of the house of Israel. Rahab traded places with Achan; she responded in faith to what she had heard, and was incorporated into Israel. And Uriah's wife Bathsheba birthed Solomon, immediate heir to God's promise to David. These women show us that God can pick anyone up from the bottom of the pile, and incorporate them into his story.

And what about the men? Through his encounter with Tamar, Judah was transformed. Once willing to kill Tamar while indulging his own sexual needs, he became a man who was willing to lay down his life for his youngest brother Benjamin. As a result, though he was only the fourth son of Jacob, Israel's lineage to David and on to the Messiah was through him, not his three elder brothers. Boaz did what was right, even at cost to himself. And David, convicted of his sin by Nathan the prophet, repented and daringly prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps 51:10). These men show us that God can take the vilest offender and give him new life, incorporating him into the lineage of the Messiah. Jesus is not ashamed to have these skeletons in the closet of his ancestry.

But there is more: there is a fifth woman. After the 39th "begat" of the genealogy, Matthew changes the pattern:

Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. (1:16)

After "Jacob begat Joseph," we would expect to read, "and Joseph begat Jesus by Mary." This would fit the pattern of the other generations and the pattern of the four previous women. The genealogy establishes Joseph as the legal father for the purposes of pedigree and legitimacy, but he is not a birth parent. Joseph did not beget or father Jesus. Jesus was begotten of his mother Mary. How is that possible? You'll have to wait for next week when Matthew answers the "how" question. But to give you a quick preview, it's "from the Holy Spirit." The four women of the earlier part of the genealogy have prepared the way for this the biggest surprise of all: it is a woman not a man who is identified as the birth parent of Jesus the Christ. Mary not Joseph is the one chosen for this honor.

Advent is a season of hope, and hope is the particular theme of this the first Sunday. This genealogy is a genealogy of hope. Hope that the "ought-to-be" which has degenerated into the "is" can become something new: the "can be" and ultimately the "will be." At Advent we immerse ourselves in the birth story of Jesus. We read Matthew's genealogy of Jesus Christ. We see Israel's three-stage story of rise, fall and flat-line. Perhaps you see your story in that. But then we read that it is the genealogy of Jesus Christ, that the flat-line ends in him, that there is hope for a re-start. The Lord had not forgotten his people. He would be true to Abraham; he would be true to David. Though his people were faithless, he did indeed remain faithful. He would raise his promises from the ashes.

A few years ago I was given a beautiful illustration of this: the Japanese art form of *kintsugi* or *kintsukuroi*. "Kintsukuroi ("golden repair") is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold... As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise."¹

A couple of years ago a friend gave me a *kintsukuroi* pot. This pot has been through the "ought to be," the "is," and the "can be" stages. It was made to be a useful pot; it was intact and served the purposes for which it was made. In Biblical terms, it was "good." But then the pot was smashed; it entered the "is" stage of being broken and useless. But it was put back together again. It was repaired in such a way that not only did it recover its original purpose as a useful pot, but it was even more beautiful for having been repaired with gold. Its beauty lies in its brokenness; the finished article is more beautiful for having been broken and repaired. This is what "can be" when an artist takes what "is" and renovates and renews.

Advent is the season of hope. God came to us in Christ, and he comes to us through his Holy Spirit. He bids us come to him that we might be repaired and renewed. He bids us come in our "is" state, no matter how broken that is, no matter how far short of the "ought to be" it falls. He offers us his "can be." But it is available only in Christ and only through his Spirit. In Christ, as we learn in this genealogy, all of his promises are Yes!

1. "Kintsugi." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi>.