

Happy New Year!

No I haven't lost the plot, I'm referring to the fact that today marks the beginning of a new liturgical year, as we enter into the four weeks of Advent. Which means - three weeks on Tuesday it will be Christmas day!

Have you sent you wish list to Santa yet? I have, but instead of saying what I would like I sent a list of gifts I wouldn't like.....anything from Ikea which has to be assembled and any electrical gadget which my four year old grandson won't be able to teach me how to use. I have a 100% blind spot when it comes to understanding assembly or user instruction booklet. It will be interesting to see how Santa responds.

But before Santa's arrival is the season of Advent; the time when our faith should be considered in relation to the past, present and future. Four weeks during which we can get to know more intimately the Christ who was and is and is to come.

So today I want us to be reminded of and to celebrate the fact that when God gave humankind the gift of salvation, he didn't send a booklet of complicated instructions to figure it out. Instead, he sent his son to live amongst us as a human being.

And as a starting point I want us to consider Jesus' family tree.

Gilly read for us Jesus' family tree found in Matthew's gospel. You may be surprised, however, that there is a second and very different family tree listed in Luke's gospel. Luke works back from Jesus through Abraham, to Adam and finally to God, whereas Matthew, as we heard begins his list of names from Abraham to Jesus.

And the odd thing is that the lists don't match. One significant difference is obvious – Matthew's list contains the names of women; Luke's is entirely made up of men's names and equally mystifying is that they both give a different name for Joseph's father! How come? Ever since the early days of the church learned scholars have arrived at different explanations as to why this should be so, and that is best left for another day.

It is a fact that women are not normally mentioned in Jewish genealogies so I find it intriguing as to why Matthew should include the name of not just one woman but the names of four women from the old Testament: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah who we know as Bathsheba, and Mary the mother of Jesus from the New Testament.

Earlier this year I spoke about how moralistic the rules surrounding engagement and marriage were in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish society and by announcing her pregnancy before being married Mary at best would have been ostracized and shamed out of polite society.

The Old Testament women, in many ways, were worse still.

In Genesis 38 the twice widowed and childless Tamar pretends to be a prostitute and seduces her father in law in order to get pregnant and thereby secure succession of the family line.

The story of Rahab is perhaps better known – she was the prostitute who hid the two spies sent to Jericho by Joshua.

Ruth was a Moabite. The Israelites had nothing but contempt for the Moabites because the Moabite tribe derived from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter. And as we heard

in our 'summer of love' series Ruth was not backward in coming forward to become Boaz's wife.

Then there's Bathsheba. You may remember her from that same series as the woman whose husband was murdered by King David after he became besotted with her during their adulterous relationship.

Four women; five if you include Mary, whose reputations did not speak well of them. Now common sense suggests that if you wish to proclaim the greatness and wonder of who Jesus Christ was then you should not say or write anything to tarnish that image and yet that is exactly what Matthew does.

Matthew is being completely honest and saying that Jesus led a fully human life, complete with human ancestors who were both good and bad. And it is as if he is deliberately making the point, that Jesus' ministry was for everyone; that the purity of our blood lines; our colour, or our race, makes no difference to Jesus.

All four of the Old Testament women named are not Jewish, but foreigners: Tamar was an Aramean; Rahab a Canaanite; Ruth a Moabite and Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite. They were in other words, Gentiles.

Whilst Jesus' earthly ministry was focussed on the Jews, there are many instances recorded in scripture where he ministers to Gentiles and in the story of the Good Shepherd (John 10) Jesus says "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd".

And that message; that inclusiveness of which you and I benefit today, was confirmed unequivocally by Paul in our Romans reading "Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too".

*Jesus is the lamb of God who takes the sin of the world!* That doctrine, expressed in various ways, lies at the centre of Anglican faith and it means that our sins were forgiven once and for all when Jesus died on the cross. By Christ's stripes we have been saved. That's what the doctrine of Salvation means.

In the Gloria we sing: "Lord, Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world". Our past and present sins have been forgiven – even the sins of non Jewish folk like me and you.

It took a while for the early church to recognize that salvation was available to the Gentiles. Two weeks ago Rogan told us about Peter being hesitant to bring the gospel to a Gentile household, but God made it plain to him that Cornelius was also one of the elect and Paul's teaching makes that abundantly clear – but so, if you think about it, does Matthew.

Matthew reminds us God's great plan is worked out in the lives of individuals who are far from perfect. He also reminds us that Salvation is for all.

The first candle lit on our Advent wreath is commonly referred to as the candle of hope. Our hope of salvation in Jesus Christ.

