



WHO

DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

INTRO

Who do you think you are? I'm sure we've all seen it: the BBC programme that explores the past of selected celebrities. Sometimes they find out some quite remarkable things – like rower MATTHEW PINSENT'S connection to the royal family via Henry VIII. Or quintessential Irishman GRAHAM NORTON who found he was from a family of English settlers to Ireland. Some had connections abroad. ZOE WANAMAKER found that her father Sam had a FBI file as a communist but had connections to Jewish settlers in the USA from the Ukraine.

My mother once told me that she never bothered to think too hard about her ancestors just in case she discovered that someone had been an exceptional rogue. That's a pity because so often we forget about the characters in our families' past. For example, my great grandfather, BILL NEWINN William Thomas was also known as Bill New Inn – named as he was after his occupation as landlord of the New Inn in Tongwynlais near Cardiff – I believe my Great-Great Grandfather John Thomas was proprietor there as well. That was in the days when the Temperance Movement was strong amongst the chapel-going population but that didn't stop Bill being an Elder in his local church!

Genealogy was important to Jewish people – and still is because they like to prove their descent. Strangely, these days, you need to at least have a nice Jewish mum to be regarded as Jewish, but more conventionally in Jesus' day you counted lineage through male ancestors and most genealogical lists like the one read to us this morning consisted of men.

The thing about Christmas is that everything seems so clean cut and cute. MANGER The baby, the manger, the star, the shepherds, the wise men. But it was not as pretty as all that when we scratch the surface – a baby born into a poor family in insanitary conditions POOR FAMILY that would have been just another pauper's birth if God hadn't attracted attention to it.

But hidden between the lines – though there for anyone to see, if you know what you're looking for – there's a Christmas story which is a lot grittier and more uncomfortable, but a lot more inclusive, than the one we're used to. The first chapter of Matthew gives us a genealogy – a list of names. Take the first half of Matthew 1, for instance – the bit that's never read at Christmas services, because it's just names we can't pronounce.

Now here's a list of names – some of the great men of Jewish history but strangely, there are five women on the list! Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. And they all had what many people in their own day would consider a dodgy reputation. Now remember - all these people were in the family of Jesus – this is the family whom the eternal Son of God became a part of.

Tamar She was the daughter-in-law of Judah, one of the early patriarchs. She married one of his sons, and he died; according to the custom of the time, she married the second son, and he died. Judah should have married her to his third son, but he wouldn't do it as he considered her bad luck. So faced with being a childless widow for the rest of her life, she disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked Judah himself into making her pregnant: and Jesus is descended from her.

Rahab A foreigner; a real prostitute this time, who's living in Jericho when it's attacked by a marauding host of Hebrews from the wilderness across the Jordan. She shelters two spies who've come to see what its defences are like. She betrays her own people, and they're all massacred apart from her and her family. To the Hebrews, she was a heroine – but you just have to wonder. Jesus is descended from her. By modern Jewish rules, her inclusion in his family tree wouldn't make him Jewish – and that would also include David and a whole host of great kings of the OT! And of course, Jesus is descended from her.

Ruth A lovely, loyal, kind-hearted girl who sticks by her mother-in-law after her husband dies and follows her to a strange land, far from her own people. Because Ruth is a foreigner too, from Moab, Israel's hereditary enemy; and no matter how kindly Boaz treated her, she'd always be a foreigner. She too is an ancestor of Jesus.

Bathsheba. She was married to Uriah the Hittite, had an affair with King David, and became pregnant by him: David had her husband killed to cover the whole thing up. There she was, implicated in adultery and murder – and Jesus is descended from her.

Mary, the fifth woman in the list? Here we have a teenage mother with a shadow hanging over her reputation. You see, to the outside world either she and Joseph had committed the scandal of anticipating the wedding night, or the child she was carrying wasn't even his. Not, you might think, the best start in life for the promised Messiah. In fact some scholars think that the way the story of the birth is told, with there being no room for them at the inn – probably the house of relatives, in fact – indicates her family's disapproval of the way they think she's behaved. Of course, we know the rumours were false and Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit whilst still a virgin. She knew it, Joseph knew it – but people talk don't they. And the Jews did long after Jesus lived on the Earth.

JESUS – ONE OF US So what does Jesus' descent show us, by the standards of the time, even as a descendant of Abraham and of David, there were some pretty dodgy people in his lineage. Just a minute, He's the Son of God and sinners such as these are in His heritage – yes.

It doesn't get better when we consider those who affirmed His birth. There were the shepherds! They are the real outsiders. Shepherds were at the lowest level of society. But they were the first after his parents to welcome the Messiah into his world.

In fact, the only people in the birth stories of Jesus who might seem to have a claim to be there are the Magi, the priest-astrologers from Persia who watched for signs in the heavens. They, at least, brought a certain dignity to events (though of course they might not have appeared until a good while later). But notice that they too are outsiders – they are foreigners who worship a strange god, and because they acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah they are threatened with death. There's a pattern here, for those with eyes to see it, and it's one that challenges us today.

Jesus is descended from people who aren't respectable. His birth is doubtful, and his connections questionable. That followed Him around through most of His life. Many people don't come to church regularly because they somehow feel that they are an outsider. They want to find out more about God but somehow because of where they come from or the sort of background they have in life, they feel like an outsider. If you feel like that this morning then Jesus can identify with you and says "I can relate to that".

Right at the heart of the Christmas story is a simple message – that God became an outsider in this world because He wanted to reach out to everyone – and that includes especially those who feel that somehow they are not worthy or good enough to be in the presence of God.

But that's exactly what God wants each of us to understand – He loves each one of us and starts by accepting us as we are. Jesus came and died to make people who feel like outsiders, consider themselves unworthy and not good enough for God, understand that despite that, He wants us to know Him.

Perhaps that's you this morning. Maybe you're just getting to know what Jesus is about. Or maybe you trusted Jesus years ago but have kind of drifted away and feel awkward about picking things up again. Jesus knows what that awkwardness is about, but He accepts us as we are and gives us the power to be the people that can realise our spiritual potential in Christ.

This Christmas, why not trust Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. Or return to Him. Put the meaning to life back that you're missing, find that strength you need to live, find that peace of mind about your future. Of course, Jesus grew up into a man and many amazing things happened as His life touched others.

Challenge – how about you?