

Abraham – Genesis 12:1-5a, Galatians 3:23-29

This morning time with the children REALLY is for everyone – and we will be using these (*sheet*) because, as I mentioned in *Sunday to Sunday* this week, today we start a series that will run from now all the way until Christmas – looking at Jesus’ genealogy (**3 slides**) as recorded in Matthew chapter 1.

Family trees can be tricky things – for many reasons. But if you know – from memory - some of your grandparents’ names – please stand up. OK, if you know - from memory – some of your great grandparents’ names – stay standing up. *If you know – from memory – some of your great grandparents’ names – stay standing up.* Wow! You can all have a seat!

Genealogies might seem a bit boring to us, but for many cultures – for Jesus’ culture – they are very important. So, we’re going to read this genealogy, but because it is a bit boring to just read names, we’re going to do an activity first.

(slide - activity)

- On the sheets in your pews, circle all the names you know stories about.
- Matthew’s genealogy includes men *and women*. Put a star next to each woman listed (even if no name is given).
- Can you see any patterns in the way the names are laid out?

Read passage. (3 slides – reading)

(slide: debrief) - Debrief with the person next to you: *How did you do?*

- How many names do you know stories about?
- How many women did you count?
- Did you see a pattern?

Did you see a pattern? Verse 17 **(slide):** “*So all the generations from Abraham to David are 14 generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, 14 generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, 14 generations.*”

Now we know the life is never that perfect...so obviously the number 14 is important! This is a bit obscure **(slide)**, but the Hebrew alphabet (just consonants) is also the Hebrew numbers - so David’s name - d,w,d – is also the numbers – 4,6,4 – which adds up to? 14! I think of this passage as a neon sign saying, *David, David, David!* **(slide – sign)** In other words, Jesus is *really really really* related to David, and therefore, *really, really really* the Messiah!

How many women did you find? Five. All with amazing stories!

How many other stories did you know? A lot? A few? What’s amazing to me is that some names are up in lights – i.e. *David, Abraham* – but others are much more obscure – *Nahshon the father of Salmon*, for example, but all of them are part of Jesus’ family tree. The same is true of us! We’re all different – ordinary and special at the same time – but we are also now all part of Jesus’ family tree!

All God's children – Genesis 12:1-5a, Galatians 3:23-29

Now I asked earlier those who know – from memory – some of their (great) great grandparents' names to stand up. Could you stand up again because I am curious about why – in a modern society which has, as French historian Pierre Nora puts it, *“severed the living connections we had to the past”* – you have committed these names to living memory?

People's stories...

I know, from memory, that my great grandmother's name was Laura Leal, and her maiden name was Epplestone, and her mother was a Tunbridge, and her mother was a Baker, and her mother's name was Jane Wood.

And the reason I know this is because Jane was sent to Australia as a convict, and it is one of those weird Australian quirks that we now take pride in having a convict ancestor – until we put that alongside ancestry that goes back 65,000 years in this land!

But the reason I remember that genealogy is to connect myself to that ancestor, because that ancestor says something about me.

And like this, but in a much bigger way (like 65,000 years of being in this land) Jesus' genealogy going back all the way to Abraham, to the start of the story of God's relationship with God's people, says something about who Jesus is.

So, what do we know about Abraham?

One of the first things we know, from Genesis chapter 12, is that when God calls Abraham, he listens and he goes. Verse 4: *“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him....”* The listing here of country, kindred and father's house, emphasises what it costs Abraham to respond to God's call. And this very exact list contrasts with the very inexact nature of the journey he embarks on, *“to the land that [God] will show [him]”*. Abraham is a person who is willing to journey from the known to the unknown, from security to insecurity, from familiar to foreign. And because he does, he is celebrated in Scripture as a person of faith. Hebrews 11:8; *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”*

As a person of faith, journeying from the known to the unknown, giving up so much, but knowing that he goes with God, Abraham models for us the Christian journey and what we might give up – Mark 10:29; *house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields* - for the sake of the gospel.

Perhaps we don't identify with leaving country or kindred or father's house – or *brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields* – but for all of us, in unique ways, following Jesus faithfully means leaving behind our old sources of strength, our old sources of security, and finding that God is encountered in new ways as we journey into the unknown. There is a giving up – and there is a receiving – as Jesus says in Mark – a hundredfold.

(slide) The famous Scottish physician, missionary and campaigner against the slave trade, David Livingston, wrote: *“People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Is that a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful*

activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny? It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life--these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which he made who left his Father's throne on high to give himself for us."

Jesus is the son of Abraham because he hears and he goes. In emptying himself, in being born in human likeness, he does not count the cost.

The second thing we know about Abraham is that he is the most unpromising person to receive a promise that he will found a great nation, and yet he, and his wife Sarai (later Sarah) are the people that God chooses.

Verse 4 tells us, *"Abram was seventy-five years when he departed from Haran."* And although Sarah is slightly younger, in Genesis 11:30 we are told, *"Now Sarai was barren; she had no child."*

You know the story (you remember the sermon with the jokes!) how the drama from this point on focuses on how first Abraham and Sarah, and then Abraham, Sarah and God, bring this promise of children and descendants to fulfilment.

We can talk about how the child that is eventually born, to a 90-year-old, barren woman and a 100-year-old man is a miracle. Or we can emphasise that none of this was possible - apart from God – apart from God and these two people working together.

Perhaps that is the same thing! And that is what miracles look like in our lives too! None of us are called to follow Jesus because we are up to the job. We are clearly not! We are not brave enough, or bold enough, or giving enough, or forgiving enough, or loving enough, but God calls us because God works with the unusual suspects – because that is how God loves. As the song we just sang says, *"none is unwanted, none insignificant, love needs a universe of folk to love."*

Martin Luther, the 16th century priest known for kickstarting the Protestant Reformation, wrote a German translation of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) at a time when the church tended to disregard the Hebrew Scriptures in favour of the allegedly purer and more spiritual New Testament. In his preface, he explains why: **(slide)**

"There are some who have little regard for the Old Testament. They think of it as a book that was given to the Jewish people only and is now out of date, containing only stories of past times.... But Christ says in John 5, 'Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me.'... [T]he Scriptures of the Old Testament are not to be despised but diligently read.... Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies... Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them."

Jesus is the son of Abraham because he lies in simple and lowly swaddling cloths and because he continues to call the simple and the lowliest to be part of this great work of love.

Finally, overwhelmingly, what we know about Abraham is that he was tenaciously committed to this promise and blessing of family.

There is a story – a story about the story or a *midrash* as it is called in Jewish circles – written by Rabbi Marc Gellman, which goes like this (abbreviated):

Most people, Rabbi Gelman writes, do not realise it, but God put in calls to other people before finally putting in a call to Abram.

First God called Eber and said, “Eber, leave your country and your neighbours and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

And Eber said, “Who are you?” And God said, “God.” And Eber said, “The god of what?” And God said, “The God of everything.” And Eber said, “Don’t be ridiculous, there is no god of everything. There is a god of the sun and the moon, the night and the day, the mountains and forests and deserts. If you ask me, you are too late. Everything has a god. There is no god of everything.”

...Eber and God never talked again.

The next person God called was Peleg and gave him the message.

“Who are you?” asked Peleg. And God said, “God.” And Peleg said, “Where are you?” And God said, “I am everywhere.”....Peleg roared with laughter. “What! You are the invisible god of everything with no statue, and you want me to leave my home and everything and follow you...? Do you think I am crazy?”

...God and Peleg never talked again.

Then God went to Serug and gave him the same message.

“Who are you?” said Serug. “God.” And Serug said, “But what will you give me?” “I just told you,” God said. And Serug said, “You don’t understand. I am not interested in moving anywhere or doing anything just so that my great-great-great-grandchildren will be a great nation. I want to know what’s in it for me right now...”

But God said nothing. ...That was the last time Serug ever heard from God.

By this time God was not sure about finding the right person. But God went to Abram and said, “Abram, leave your country and your neighbours and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you...” and you know the rest.

And Abram said, "I will go, but there is just one thing I want." "Is it to know what I'm the God of?" asked God. "No," said Abraham. "Is it to have a statue of me?" asked God. "No," said Abraham. "Is it to get something out of this for yourself?" "No." said Abraham, "I want to take my family with me."

So, right then God decided not to ask any more questions, and God let Abram gather his family and pack their things for the journey to the place that God would show to them. And God knew then that the right person was going to the right place at the right time for the right reasons.

Abraham was family oriented – not just to his immediate family, and to their families, but beyond that. The blessing God gave to him and Sarah, was to bless, *"all the families of the earth"*. And this blessing is passed on down to the line to Jesus and from Jesus it is passed on to us.

As we heard this morning, *"Now that faith has come – now that Christ has come – we are all children of God.... There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus. And we, too, are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise - the promise of blessing for all the families of the earth."*

As children of Abraham, as followers of Jesus, we are called to journey with God, to leave behind our old sources of strength and find our strength in God. We are called to do this, just as we are, because God loves us. And in us and through us our family-oriented God will continue to bless all the families of the earth.