

God Favours Scarlet Women

A sermon on Matthew 1: 1-17; Joshua 2:1-15 & 1 John 4:1-6 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 December 2019
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Message

When God is moving to do something new among us, it almost always seems scandalous, immoral and offensive to many, and is just as likely to involve those who are regarded as morally suspect.

Sermon

One of the criticisms I've been receiving for thirty years since I began saying that the church should welcome homosexual people is that I am trashing the church's reputation and God's reputation, because it is essential that the church always maintain the highest standards of moral behaviour, and maintain a clear and safe distance from any whiff of sin and scandal. There have been people who thought that even if God doesn't hate gays, the presence of homosexual people in the church would raise too many complicated ethical questions and would confuse the people and cloud the witness to solid family values.

Behind this lies one of the most deep seated and unhelpful myths about the meaning of Christian faith: that it is primarily focussed on getting us all to behave, to conform to a set of good moral behaviours. The basic message is presented as "Jesus died for you. Now behave!"

And of course, it is not only gay people who have been made to feel like unwanted failures by such teachings. Most of us carry things in our pasts or in the secret desires of our hearts that would have us thrown out of many churches if they were made known.

Anything to do with human bodies and sex is especially likely to invoke guilt and anxiety. Our reading from John's first letter reminded us that there have always been religious people who are so fearful of the human body that they even want deny that Jesus really had one.

This view that Christianity's primary goal is to ensure moral purity and purge the unrighteous from our midst has many problems, starting with the fact that it is thoroughly unbiblical and thoroughly inconsistent with the life and witness of Jesus.

For proof of this, you need go no further than the opening seventeen verses of the New Testament which we heard as our gospel reading tonight. Matthew's gospel was written to a church whose people were prone to thinking that the most important thing was staying pure and maintaining strict moral standards. And Matthew begins shaking them up right from the get-go.

As we heard, these verses consist of a rather lengthy family tree of Jesus. It is not often read out in church because it is mostly just a long list of names, 42 generations worth, most of which have no particular significance and are not so easy for English-speakers to pronounce. But for those with eyes to see, there is some hidden excitement in these verses which relates to what I've just been saying and is actually quite important in the way it sets up the Christmas story and all that follows.

The forty two lines mostly follow a repetitive pattern: this bloke was the father of that bloke, and that bloke was the father of another bloke, and so on and so on. But every now and again, just five times out of forty two, it breaks the rhythm and names the mother as well as

the father. So if you are reading the whole thing out loud, it is the names of those five mothers that wake you up and grab your attention.

The fifth one is Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose story is about to be introduced on the next page, but the other four were all well known to those who knew their Hebrew Bible stories, and none of them are the role models of purity and sexual modesty that the family values crusaders want their daughters to grow up to be and their sons to grow up to marry.

Let me introduce you to them. The first named is Tamar, and as Matthew tells us, the father of her child was Judah after whom the whole religion of Judaism takes its name. But maybe you don't know the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38).

Here's the thing: Tamar was actually Judah's daughter-in-law. She was married to Judah's oldest son, Er, but he died young, leaving her a widow. You might remember from one of my recent sermons that an old Jewish law called Levirate marriage said that when a man died leaving a childless widow, his brother was to marry the widow and the first child born would count as belonging to the dead brother. Well here's where the smutty details begin. The brother, Onan, is pressured into marrying Tamar but he doesn't want to father a child for his dead brother, so he invents the form of contraception that parts of the Church have since championed – the withdrawal method – and as the Bible puts it, “spills his semen on the ground”. Then he dies too, and Tamar is still childless. But Judah is now scared that any son who marries her is going to die, so he breaks faith and sends her back to her father without letting the next one marry her.

A few years later, Judah himself has been widowed, and Tamar hears that he's walking down a road near her home. So, knowing what sort of man her famous father-in-law is, she disguises herself as a street prostitute with a veiled face, and when Judah sees her, he's overcome with lust and pays to have sex with her. He didn't have any money on him, so he leaves some identity docs with her until he can come back with the money, but when he comes back, she's disappeared and no one knows who or where she is.

A few months later he receives a report accusing Tamar of falling pregnant by playing the whore, and he sees an opportunity to get rid of the potential risk to his sons by calling for her to be burned at the stake. But as she is dragged out into the public square, she produces his identity docs and says, “I'm pregnant by the man who owns these!” and Judah is publicly shamed and has to back down and pardon her.

Now there's a lovely G-rated family values story for you! Not! Matthew could have easily just said Judah was the father of Perez, and kept right on going, but he doesn't want the uptight moralists in his congregation to forget how Judah came to be the father of Perez. Judah AND TAMAR! The scandalous ancestors of our whole Jewish nation. Ancestors of our Lord Jesus.

The next woman named is Rahab. I don't have to tell you her story, because we heard it as our first reading (Joshua 2:1-15). She is identified straight up front as a prostitute. The two Hebrew spies, while checking out the city of Jericho prior to laying siege to it, decided to spend the night in her house. When military spies choose to stay the night with a prostitute, it's got nothing to do with collecting strategic intelligence! But, to cut the story short, the end result is that this foreign sex worker is protected during the siege and she ends up married to a Jewish man and becomes part of the family line of King David and eventually of Jesus.

Once again, it is not the models of chastity and purity that Matthew is highlighting in the family tree. It's those tangled up in scandal and sleaze. What could be his point, one wonders?

The next woman named is in the very next generation of the family line. Ruth has a whole book of the Bible dedicated to her story. She is certainly not a sex worker but, although this is usually glossed over in the telling of her story, she does seduce and sleep with a well respected Jewish man in a successful attempt to persuade him to marry her. This is not usually one of the biblical behaviours favoured by the family values crusaders.

The thing that was controversial about her back then was that she was a gentile foreigner marrying a Jewish man, and at the time her story was written down, the purity crusaders were saying that foreign wives were a threat to Jewish moral purity and should all be banished. So the writer picked up on the story of Ruth to emphasise that even the great Jewish hero King David was the great grandson of a foreign wife, not to mention the great great grandson of Rahab, a foreign sex worker.

Which of course brings us to King David and the next woman named in the family tree: Bathsheba. Now there are certainly people who will try to make out that Bathsheba too was a scarlet woman, but really these are the people who always want to blame women for the bad behaviour of men. "Her skirt was too short or her top too low cut or she batted her eyelids flirtatiously," or whatever. This is frequently crap, and the only reason such charges are levelled against Bathsheba is because everyone wants to protect the reputation of King David, the biggest hero of ancient Israel.

Usually they do this by avoiding all mention of Bathsheba. But Matthew again breaks the flow of the family tree to specifically highlight her inclusion. Not this time because of her suspect behaviour, but because of David's. As soon as you link Bathsheba to David, you are reminding everyone that however much of a hero he might have been, he had one hell of a big skeleton in his closet. He abducted and raped the wife of his next door neighbour, and then when she fell pregnant, he had her husband murdered to cover it up.

This is the side of King David that Matthew chooses to highlight to his readers who wanted to exclude all morally suspect people from the life of faith.

Then, having drawn our attention to this line-up of sexual scandal, Matthew names the fifth mother, Mary, and takes us straight into the story we heard last Sunday, which of course, is a story about how Mary's pre-marital pregnancy caused a scandal in her home town, and nearly cost her at least her husband, if not her life.

There is no good news here for the traditional family values lobby and the sexual morality police. They have of course, tried to wriggle out of it by focussing on Mary and Joseph as models of premarital sexual abstinence, but the fact is that if God thinks it is terribly important that he and his followers have nothing to do with anything that contains even a whiff of scandal or suspect morality, then he really stuffed up here, because it is only by ignoring the biblical context and the social context that you can hold their story up as any kind of eulogy to virginity. The way Matthew sets up the story, he makes it very clear that not only is this a scandalous situation, but that it comes from a long family history of infamous sex scandals.

Now it might not be good news for those who want religion to be all about policing people's behaviour, but it is very very good news for pretty much everyone else. Whatever it is in your past, or even in your present, that you thought put you undoubtedly on the outer with God and made you a person who could never be someone God would want to be associated with or someone who God might ask for help in bringing about the things that God is doing in the world, then this story tells you that God is not nearly that precious about his reputation, and that God is working in and through all sorts of messed up people, not only those who have managed to live up to some standard of squeaky clean moral perfection.

If you are gay, or divorced, or transgender, or you once had an affair, or an abortion, or you worked in the sex industry, or maybe it had nothing to do with sex but you have fallen foul of some other standard of social acceptability, and you've been told or made to feel by some church that you are thus a leper for life and can never be more than a second-class Christian, then grab a hold of this first chapter of Matthew and know that God is a lot more willing to be associated with you than with the sorts of judgemental moral crusaders who would cut you off. When God takes the big action to send his love into the world in tangible human form, he is just as likely to do so through people just like you.

And let me conclude with a more general observation as well. One of the reasons that the traditional family values crusaders use the word "traditional" is that they assume that things have been better in the past and that new changes usually take us onto slippery slopes of sin and wickedness, and therefore maintaining healthy morality means maintaining things the way they have been before.

But God does not seem to be on about always doing things the same old way. God frequently wants to do something new and unprecedented. No god has become a human baby before, and no god has allowed himself to be crucified by his own creatures before, and no god has raised a dead person to life and glorified him as lord of all before. But because religious peoples are always so prone to mistaking opposition to change for faithfulness, they are almost always scandalised when God begins doing anything new.

Just look at the Jesus story. He is born in scandal, and he dies in scandal. And then his body goes missing and there is more scandal still. And God is thoroughly in the thick of it all and the religious people have got their noses right out of joint. They are far too scandalised to get on board with God.

So when you hear religious people saying we can't ordain women or we can't accept homosexuals or we can't criticise governments or oppose wars because the church has a long history and we've never done it that way before, don't assume that that settles it. It is just as likely to be a sign that God is well and truly involved and is challenging us to accept the incarnation of love in a new way, even if it be as startling as a virgin birth in questionable circumstances or a resurrection from the dead.

God's new world is coming, and anyone who has read the Son of God's family tree should know that God is not going to let the moral scruples of the religiously unimaginative and hung-up derail it. Come, Lord Jesus, be born anew in our messed up lives!