

The Bible text I would like to read now is indeed the Bible text for the sermon. I have not made a mistake in the biblical passage - which you might think when you hear or read it. It is the prelude to the Christmas story in Matthew and, strictly spoken, Christmas is unthinkable without it - even though most of us have never read this text, or would not be able to retell it as we do with the Christmas story in Luke. But let us first listen to Matthew 1:1-17 - and let us listen carefully. Perhaps one or two things sound familiar to us, and perhaps we discover something new at some point:

### **Text reading Matthew 1, 1-17**

<sup>1</sup>An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup>and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup>and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup>and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup>and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup>and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup>and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. <sup>12</sup> And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup>and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup>and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup>and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

<sup>17</sup> So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Sisters and brothers, where are our roots?

We have family roots in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, France, Spain, Indonesia, Brazil, the USA, Great Britain, Australia,

Germany, South Africa, Switzerland, and so on...

Everything that lives has roots, has an origin, a history.

Without roots there is no fruit, no growth, no life.

So where are our roots?

When we as Christians look for the roots of our faith, we discover that the origin of our faith is very old. It goes back to the Holy Scriptures themselves. And the roots have names: first and foremost Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself also has a history, has roots. Everything that became visible in him and that is so important to us has a prehistory, and that is the one of the people of Israel.

We can say: Jesus' face is a mirror, in which we can discover the faces of Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, Leah and Rachel and Jacob. He is their descendant, he is of their blood.

About eighty years ago here in Germany, it was embarrassing to come across an Abraham or a Lea when doing genealogical research. The family books recommended Germanic names; next to them was the list of names not to be recommended. Sara and Isaac were among those, of course, and they had to be registered in the passports of Jewish people as names of shame.

How many Christians at that time might have considered that these two names were on the list of Jesus' ancestors?

When we look at the family tree of Jesus, we realise: Our faith is not a detached religious idea, our faith has history. And when we celebrate Advent and Christmas we confess: I, too, we, too, belong to this history that is connected to Jesus and his Jewish ancestors.

By the way: this kind of historiography is oriented towards names, births and deaths, family relationships, the history of blessings. This kind of historiography is a protest against our kind of historiography, which until today is oriented towards the dates of battles and victories.

Matthew tells us much more: the heading he gives to the genealogy and the Gospel is: "**This is the book of the history of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham**" - names which are full of hope and still alive.

David was the king, who was supposed to enforce the law and the peace of God in our world. He failed. Of course, he failed.

Since then hope increased that one day the Son of David would come, who would not fail in the name of God, but would establish the kingdom, where justice and peace dwell and where suffering and pain and tears would not exist anymore.

"**Hosanna to the Son of David**", people shouted to Jesus.

Do we realise what tremendous expectations were alive in this call?

We still sing of the Son of David when we sing "lo how a rose e'er blooming". We are singing about a branch from this root, which we also have before us in the family tree: "of Jesse's lineage coming".

Jesse is the father of David, called "Isai" in the family tree. When we sing this familiar Christmas carol, we are actually singing about the family tree of Jesus! Our hope has always been linked to names and faces, our hope is incarnate. Our hope has been passed on from generation to generation, from birth to birth. Until it culminated in this one name, to which we refer: Jesus, God is salvation. That is why the song says: "... from sin and death he saves us". Saves! From sin!

God does not save the heroes of faith, but the worn-outs, the wandering ones like Abraham or the questionable ones like Jacob. People like those in Jesus' lineage are representative for us, representative for people who have questions, for people who burden themselves with guilt, again and again, and who are nevertheless supposed to belong.

Just like the four women who are an important part of Jesus' family tree: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. It is said: "Men make history".

"History" often enough was "his story". God's story with us never has been so exclusive. These four women are not among those about whom the Bible has positive things to report; they are somehow strange and partly ambiguous people.

There is **Tamar**. She appears in the first book of Moses. She is found in a very important place, at the beginning of the tribe of Judah. She fights for her rights with courageous and extraordinary methods: After the death of her first husband, she is denied the legally prescribed marriage to her brother-in-law and thus the possibility of a future of her own. But she disguises herself as a prostitute and obtains a child from her father-in-law Judah in order to gain her right in the clan. Thus she becomes the foremother of the tribe of Judah.

**Rahab** is the prostitute who shelters Israel's scouts in Jericho. With the help of her courage the scouts get out of Jericho unharmed. Rahab plays a key role in the entering into the Promised Land.

**Ruth**, a Moabite woman, follows her Jewish mother-in-law to Israel in great loyalty. The friendship of the two women leads in a direct line to the birth of David.

And finally **Bathsheba**: David stole her from Uriah and had Uriah killed. "David became the father of Solomon with Uriah's wife", the bible notes very precisely. Nothing is hidden. Bathsheba helps Solomon to succeed to the throne and becomes the king's mother herself.

These are drastic stories, which we would hardly use to initiate the founding of a new congregation or church. A colourful, by no means festive Advent society! When electing people as bearers of his promise, God has standards very different to ours. It is a surprising fact that such an extraordinary list of names in the family tree of Jesus takes us by the hand and says: Just look at this so totally diverse society! Why are you in doubt that the one who has put this strange community together does not also know your name, your broken life story, and has enclosed it into his community of salvation? Your path also leads to Christ, the Messiah, who will make all things new and whole.

### **Sisters and brothers,**

God has always had the irritating habit of making detours and also letting us take detours. In his plans there are people who count for little or nothing among the so-called important men and women. Foreigners, pagans, people with a morally questionable past. They play an important role in God's history with his world.

So why not us?

God's choice is more important than what people think and say and what we sometimes think about ourselves. This is what Matthew's list of names tells us. Every name is running towards the one whom Matthew recognised as the Saviour. Matthew talks about it in a hidden way.

We read: <sup>17</sup> **So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.**

It sounds as if it has been counted, as if it has been arranged. But it has a deeper meaning: it is not a historical report, but a confession of faith. The letters of the name "David" also produce a numerical value in the Hebrew alphabet, and that is - of course - fourteen! That is seven plus seven, the sacred number of completion and perfection. The early church expresses its experiences with Jesus' life and message and testifies: In Jesus we encounter the same God who led the people of Israel in former times. In Jesus, the same God shows himself in a new and yet long-promised way.

Considering this message, we also realise:

Jesus is not bringing something completely new that has never existed before. It has already been there. The message of Advent and Christmas is: This experience of Israel is not lost. The stories of the people in the family tree and in Israel's history, these stories of hope and blessing, the stories of the chosen people, they are not gone. They are in this child now born. Jesus was born that we belong to his people. We belong to his community; we are not outside, but inside the story of his church. We belong to this story of blessing!

Jesus calls us into the community, together with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, together with Ruth and Tamar and Rahab and Mary. All of them are part of our roots. This is a promising story and history: We will be a blessing for this world. In this story we can hear: God cares for the weak, for the crying and the afflicted. He does not promise heaven without pain, but justice and life and peace here on earth. Let us make sure that this story, which originally is a Jewish story, just as Jesus was a Jew - that this story does not end, but continues and lives on in our witness, in our courage and in our commitment to life. Let us make sure that we follow Jesus' roots: those of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob and those of Tamar, Ruth, Rahab and Mary.

We are deeply rooted in God's history.

We are called into God's community by his child. Amen