

## CHRISTMAS AT THE MARGINS.

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I have been doing a series over recent weeks called 'Semiotics 101.'

There's much more that could possibly be said, but I am going to put a comma there.

I actually thought of continuing the series by incorporating Christmas into it – 'Christmas as a semiotic event.'

- The Magi were master semioticians.
- Joseph's dreams.
- Simeon, led by the Spirit.
- Anna who 'happened' along at the right moment.
- Shepherd visited by angels.

It is December – the 'Advent Season,' so I plan over the next few weeks to speak about Christmas.

I want to begin with a message I am going to call, 'Christmas on the margins.'

In some ways it really does flow on from what I have been saying in Semiotics.

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Remember last week I mentioned that if you want to be a good semiotician you must have good peripheral vision.

You have to be aware of the ‘atypical, the arrhythmias, the skipped beats, the odd man out, the positive deviance.’

So often, God is at work on the margins rather than the obvious centre.

For the most part, the ancient Hebrew Prophets weren’t at the centre of religious life, they stormed in from the margins. {There were exceptions – Isaiah, Nathan, Daniel and others who were in places of influence and power.}

Christmas is a perfect illustration of this principle of God on the margins.

God’s appearance in human form at that first Christmas didn’t occur at the centre.

It wasn’t in Jerusalem, but Bethlehem; it wasn’t in the temple, but a stable; it didn’t occur with Kings and priests in attendance, but shepherds and animals.

Jesus was born at the fringe and always seemed most at home on the margins in his ministry.

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Most of his interactions with, and stories about people, concerned fringe people.

- Farmers
- Shepherds
- Widows
- Harlots

He saw and interacted with people who were well below the cultural radar screen – the pariahs, the outcasts and the rejects.

It seems that he spent way more time with victims than with victors. {There were the exceptions – Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathaea, but they were the exceptions.}

I love Len Sweet's description of Jesus' ministry –

**“Jesus came and ate good food with bad people.”**

If we are going to see God at work – we must have peripheral vision.

You have to look for Jesus where you would least expect him.

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**Len Sweet.**

**“God makes art where no expects to find it; God does his best in the worst of times.”**

The Gospel begins by strongly hinting at this principle of God at work on the margins.

**Matthew 1:1-23** is a long list of names.

We call it a genealogy.

It is hard for us to grasp why the Bible has such lists – long lists of hard to pronounce names that seem to have little relevance to the story.

They are vital on many levels.

- They show that these things aren't just fairy tales. Fairy tales don't begin with 'This one was that one's son.' Fairy tales begin with 'once upon a time.' This story of God's coming promise isn't on the same level as some story about 'Mother goose.' This isn't 'mother goose,' it's about Father God's intention in the earth.

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- These long lists of names show that God is interested in, and flows through people. He loves people. He fulfils His promises through people. These are people through whom the promise flowed. Very ordinary people who became part of the greatest promise of all time happening in the earth. I suspect if your name was in this list – you'd treat it very differently than you do at present. I heard that when the Lord of the Rings movies showed in NZ lots of people sat and waited for the credits to roll, when normally they would have left at the end of the story. Why? Because their name was on the list, or perhaps a friend's or family member's name was on it. That makes all the difference.

As we read these kinds of lists we see God as the God of history. Verse 17 gives us a 'bird's eye' perspective of God's purpose as it runs down through history.

**{Matthew 1:17 "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations."}** At 'ground level' you don't always see the purpose. There seems

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to be no rhyme or reason. We can easily get lost in the detail of the 'close at hand.' We need to see the eternal perspective. It is this eternal perspective that gives us meaning and sense.

It is fascinating to look at this list of names.

There are some real surprises in it.

It isn't what you'd expect for the genealogy of the Messiah.

There are way too many questionable and marginal people included in it.

Cambridge Church History Professor, **Eamon Duffy** wrote about this list saying,

**"From this contaminated stream is drawn pure abounding water of life."**

He went on to comment,

**"God with us," means just that. The grace, the truth and righteousness we recognize in Jesus, we must learn to recognize outside the safe world of the nice and the good, outside the charmed circle of religion. God's truth**

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**and power are elusive and liable to be pushed into dark corners of our lives and society.”**

There are lots of names we could investigate in this list to prove the point; but I want to look at five very briefly.

### **Matthew 1:3**

**“Judah had Perez and Zerah (the mother was **Tamar**), Perez had Hezron, Hezron had Aram...”**

### **Matthew 1:5-6**

**“Salmon had Boaz (his mother was **Rahab**), Boaz had Obed (**Ruth** was the mother), Obed had Jesse, Jesse had David, and David became king. David had Solomon (**Uriah's wife** was the mother)...”**

### **Matthew 1:16**

**“Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband, **the Mary** who gave birth to Jesus, the Jesus who was called Christ.”**

Five women are mentioned in this long list.

In Jewish tradition, women were never included in genealogical lists.

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Listing five women was a peculiarity unique to Jesus' genealogy.

It's shock enough that five women are listed; it's amplified when you read the names of these women.

If you had to list the names of some women – there are others you might have chosen that could have lessened the outrage – famous women of the covenant; Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah.

Of the ones that are mentioned, three of the five were sexually compromised in some way, while two of them were gentile outsiders.

This seems designed to offend.

- **Tamar.**

You can read her sordid story in **Genesis 38**. She was most probably a Canaanite. Judah took her as a wife for his firstborn son. That boy was wicked and God took his life. Tamar was given to the second son in what was called a '**Levirate marriage**,' so that he could raise up children for his dead brother. He refused to do so and God took his life. Judah promised Tamar to his third son

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but didn't follow through on his promise. Tamar takes matters into her own hand to right this injustice. Under the guise of a prostitute she sleeps with Judah and becomes pregnant by him.

Initially, when he finds she is pregnant, Judah orders her to be stoned for playing the harlot. He then finds to his chagrin, that he is the father and he acknowledges his failure and her righteousness.

Tamar's actions were ethically immoral to be sure, but they weren't driven by fleshly, seductive motives.

We must be careful that we don't read the story through 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Western eyes. This act was about justice denied; it was about her future and the family's lineage. Nevertheless, it was an action that a family historian would be tempted to gloss over. It doesn't look good in the story for a number of reason – not the least being that the person in the story who most embodies righteousness and justice is firstly a woman and secondly a gentile woman at that.

- **Rahab**

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You can read Rahab's story in **Joshua chapter's 2 and 6.**

Joshua sent two spies to check out Jericho. They found their way to Rahab's house.

She was a harlot.

It doesn't mean as some have suggested, an innkeeper; she was a prostitute. Both **Hebrews 11:31** and **James 2:25** in the New Testament call her a 'harlot; a prostitute.' There's no way of dressing this up to look better than it is.

A woman of ill repute she might have been; she was also one of spiritual perception.

### **Joshua 2:9**

**"I know that GOD has given you the land. We're all afraid. Everyone in the country feels hopeless."**

She wasn't the last woman of ill repute to have more spiritual discernment than the supposedly more righteous people around her.

### **Luke 7:37**

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**“Just then a woman of the village, the town harlot, having learned that Jesus was a guest in the home of the Pharisee, came with a bottle of very expensive perfume...”**

She helped the spies escape from the town officials and in doing so secured her and her family’s future.

She was instructed to tie a scarlet thread in the window of her house. That scarlet thread put her and all who were with her off limits to the Israelites who attacked the city.

The passage in Matthew gives us insight that the Old Testament doesn’t.

She subsequently married an Israelite, a man called **Salmon**.

Interestingly, his name means ‘garment,’ or ‘cloak.’

When I read that I couldn’t help think of the way a garment was used in the process of marriage.

### **Ezekiel 16:8**

**"As I passed by again, I saw that the time had come for you to fall in love. I covered your naked body with my coat and promised to love you. Yes, I made a marriage**

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**covenant with you, and you became mine." This is what the Sovereign LORD says.**

Remember Ruth going down to the threshing floor and putting her feet under Boaz's garment?

That was her way of saying, "Marry me."

Salmon covers Rahab with his cloak and in so doing covers her past and brings her into the covenant community of faith.

It is a wonderful picture of what our heavenly bridegroom has done for us.

### **Isaiah 61:10**

**"I will greatly rejoice in Jehovah, my soul will be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the robes of salvation, He covered me with the robe of righteousness like a bridegroom adorns himself with ornaments, and like a bride adorns herself with her jewels."**

- **Ruth.**

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Ruth was a Moabite, who married an Israelite called Mahlon.

Mahlon's family had left Israel in the face of a famine and had moved temporarily to Moab.

They stayed much longer than they had intended to and the sons, Mahlon and Chilion ended up, contrary to the Law, marrying local girls.

We don't know exactly how long they were married – it could have been 10 years.

Ruth was childless. There was no fruit in this strange land. Ironically Ruth's womb was a symbol of the bigger picture with regard this family.

It was a time of barrenness and tragedy.

The Law was quite specific on the exclusion of Moabites from the Congregation of the Lord.

### **Deuteronomy 23:3 (CEV)**

**“No Ammonites or Moabites, or any of their descendants for ten generations, can become part of Israel, the LORD's people.”**

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We see, as the story unfolds, that there is much in Ruth to admire.

She is loyal, faithful, tenderhearted, hard working and disposed towards Israel's God.

In an era of Law she finds grace.

She finds inclusion in a time when exclusion was the norm.

The outsider is invited in.

Ruth comes back to Bethlehem and ends up being married to Boaz.

In the land of promise she is fruitful and bares a son called Obed. He is the Grandfather of King David.

However exemplary Ruth was, a family historian of this time wouldn't be in a hurry to include her in any genealogical list.

Yet here she is.

- **Bathsheba.**

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Actually, she isn't names in the text; she is simply referred to as Uriah's wife.

It doesn't require a Bible scholar to know that Uriah's wife was Bathsheba.

It's story we are all very familiar with. Anyone who knows about King David, know about his adulterous tryst with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband.

It is, by far, the lowest point of David's mostly glorious rule.

Again, one might imagine a family historian doing a bit of 'creative accounting' with history at this point.

People refer to '**Revisionist History.**'

**"It is the illegitimate distortion of the historical record such that certain events appear in a more or less favourable light."**

It is very surprising that the New Testament writers didn't 'air brush the picture to make their Messiah look more impressive.

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It says much for the honesty of the writers and the integrity of the texts that they tell the story as it is.

It says even more about the mercy and grace of God in the lives of people.

I find it a truly wonderful expression of that grace that David's line doesn't come through any number of possible other women in David's harem who weren't the ill begotten wife of adultery and murder.

It flows through Bathsheba; she is Solomon's mother.

- **Mary.**

The final woman mentioned is Jesus' mother.

If Mary, at least to this point, is characterized by anything; it's ordinariness.

She's poor, engaged to a local carpenter, a fact that is not designed to lift her station in life much higher than it already is.

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Notwithstanding Hollywood's attempts to portray her as stunningly beautiful, she was probably ordinary in almost every respect including physical features.

Like Ruth, there is much to admire in her, as far as spiritual inclination and character virtues are concerned, but nothing so noticeable that you would break with tradition and include her in a genealogy.

The genealogy is a picture of a God who works at the margins.

At the outset we see a God who intends breaking down barriers; between men and women; rich and poor; insiders and outsiders; saints and sinners.

I draw great hope and comfort from this thought.

Like most of you, I consider myself a very ordinary person.

### **1 Corinthians 1:26-28**

**“My dear friends, remember what you were when God chose you. The people of this world didn't think that many of you were wise. Only a few of you were in**

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**places of power, and not many of you came from important families. But God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame. He chose the weak things of this world to put the powerful to shame. What the world thinks is worthless, useless, and nothing at all is what God has used to destroy what the world considers important.”**

It doesn't say **“none of you were in places of power or from prominent families.”**

Rather it says, **“Only a few of you were...”**

If you are one of them you are not exempt from God's purposes.

God is not a bigot in reverse – ***“I like the poor and despise the rich. I turn the insiders into outsiders.”***

There is always room in His purposes for a Nicodemus and a Joseph of Arimathaea, for a rich young ruler, if only he will make the right choice.

Mostly however, it is historically true that the Gospel begins at the margins and moves to the centre creating a revolution.

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A little boy at Sunday school was giving a talk and he started,

***“The Bible begins in Genesis and it finishes in Revolutions.”***

He was right. It does – personal revolutions, family revolutions, social revolutions and ultimately a world revolution when all things will finally be made new.

Christmas may begin on the margin, but it’s heading for the centre.

Keep your eyes open and your peripheral vision sharp.

**Saint Augustine** once advised,

**“Our whole business in this life is to restore to health the eyes of the heart whereby God may be seen.”**

Great advice!