

Dear Friends,

Matthew 1: 1-17

An angel had appeared to Joseph in a dream. I imagine he must have gone over the experience again and again, remembering what he saw, how he felt and every word he heard. The angel had said that Jesus would "save his people from their sins". That is, he would bring the forgiveness that would restore his people to their relationship with God. But who are the ones who will receive this salvation? Who are "his people"?

We might ask a similar question about another story. Luke writes about an angel who tells some frightened shepherds that he is bringing them "good news of great joy for all the people". We ask, who are "all the people"? Who are the ones who are to receive this joyful news?

I want "his people" and "all the people" to be everyone, the whole creation. I want no one to be left out. In biblical times however, when Jewish writers referred to the "people", they tended to mean just Israel. So, it is Israel who will be saved from their sins. It is good news of great joy for Israel. Does this mean that Jesus is just for the few and not for the many?

Fortunately, in Matthew's gospel, this is not the only word on the subject. It's certainly not the last word and it isn't even the first word. The first word comes right at the beginning of the book. It begins with a list of the names of those in Jesus' family tree. Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob, Jacob begat Judah and so on. Many of the greats of Israelite history are there. But it doesn't only include people from Israel. It includes people from other nations as well. Matthew also breaks with tradition by naming a handful of women in the family tree. Usually, these lists would only show the names of men, as if the men were the ones playing the important part in childbirth. Matthew, however, includes four women in his list, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. All of these were thought to come from outside of Israel. Matthew is drawing attention to the variety in Jesus' line.

Surely by pointing this out, Matthew is opening our minds to the possibility that Jesus is coming not just to save and be good news for Israel, but to save and be good news for the whole creation, to be not just for the few, not even just for the many, but for all.

Matthew will edge us further towards that understanding by telling us of the Magi. These wise men come to visit Jesus soon after his birth. They offer him their worship, their gifts, and their lives. They too are from beyond Israel.

And if we are looking for the last word on this, then the right place to find that is at the close of Matthew's book. He ends his gospel with the risen Jesus sending out his friends. His final words and the final words of the gospel are, "All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always to the end of the age”.

Clearly the gift of Jesus is a gift for all nations, all people, all the families of the earth. The gift of Jesus is for every individual. And that means that the gift of Jesus is for you. As it says in the baptism service, “For you Jesus Christ came into the world. For you he lived and showed God’s love. For you he suffered death on the cross. For you he triumphed over death rising to newness of life. For you he prays at God’s right hand. All this for you”.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.