

# Christmas Vigil, Year C

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24 December, 2018

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** Isaiah 62:1–5

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 89:4–5,16–17,27,29

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** Acts 13:16–17,22–25

**Gospel** Matthew 1:1–25

I am willing to bet that at least a few of you know who your parents are. Some may even know their grandparents. A few might even know their great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents. At some point, though, everyone's knowledge of their family runs out and it usually occurs long before we want it to.

It is not surprising, therefore, that tracing your genealogy has become something of a popular hobby, as witnessed by the number of commercials for services to help with the process. For some it's as easy as asking a few relatives some questions, putting their answers into Ancestry.com or the like and presto: instant family tree going back generations. For others the process is harder. There may not be relatives to ask. The sort of documents that online services depend on may not exist. And yet that doesn't deter everyone. Indeed, it's become so popular companies are scrambling to overcome the lack of documents. Genetic testing services are popping up, seemingly overnight, to help bridge those paperless links. Learning who our ancestors were, or at least where they came from, will help us know who we are. The virtues and flaws of those who came before us are our virtues and flaws. By knowing them we will know ourselves. Or at least that is what these companies would sell us.

Now, while I haven't gone so far as to use genetic testing, I have to admit I've done some family genealogy research myself. I've already traced my ancestors through my mother's father back a half-dozen generations and would love to continue that process, or trace back other branches at some point. And while I wouldn't go so far as to say this information has changed who I am, the fact that I'm related to a particular person at a particular time in a particular place does make the history of that time and place more meaningful to me. It allows me to gain a new appreciation for the unique sequence of events, and the set of characters, that led to my being here.

On the other hand, hearing about someone else's genealogy is generally a tedious affair. Lists of people we've never met and never will just aren't very exciting. If the person you're talking to happens to be related, then you might spend some time swapping information in order to nail down the exact nature of that relationship, but otherwise you're going to rapidly want to change the subject.

It is thus not surprising that the Lectionary allows us to skip Jesus's genealogy; 42 generations of names, even if only one name is given in most generations, is a whole lot of tedium to deal with. What do we really care about Hezron, Asaph, Azor, and all the rest? I mean, how many of you even recall me reading out those names just a few minutes ago? We don't know these people. We might read about some of them in the Bible, especially the more famous like Abraham or David, but for the most part the names are little more than that: names. They are not persons, just names.

And yet, Matthew chose to include this big, long list. He felt it was important enough to risk the tedium. What could possibly be so important? What can we learn by hearing the list of Jesus's ancestors?

In a word: family. The list of names drives home the point that Jesus had a family. He had a father and a mother, a grandfather, a great-grandfather, and so on. Many of the people on the list were dead by the time Jesus was born, but just like our deceased relatives, they remain an essential part of the family. It was through their lives that Jesus chose to come into the world. Their actions, their choices, created the little house in Nazareth where Jesus grew up. Without them Jesus would not have lived the life that he lived; a life that was far from perfect. After all, Jesus was the descendant of kings: of David and Solomon and a dozen others. And yet he lived the life of a poor man, working with his hands to make a living because those ancestors of his had made certain choices; choices which lead to the downfall of their kingdom. Manasseh in particular, Jesus's count to 14 on fingers great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, he is considered to be the worst king in Israel's history by the writers of the Books of Chronicles. Even David wasn't all sunshine and roses: he did, after all, steal another man's wife. Or how about Tamar? She actually tricked Judah into sleeping with her. Rahab betrayed her town to the conquering Israelites. Ruth was a foreigner. And even if we look at just Joseph and Mary, they aren't married. Matthew clearly says they are betrothed but not yet living together when Jesus is conceived. From our perspective this emphasizes that Mary was a virgin, then and always. But in that time and place, a pregnant, unwed woman could have easily been stoned.

No, Jesus's family is far from perfect. One might even call it broken. And in that it is the perfect representation of us, of our families. Even if everything looks perfect from the outside, if we can trace our family back for dozens of generations, we all know that there are problems in our families. It may be a crazy uncle that everyone hopes will skip Christmas this year. It might be a couple of sisters who fight every time they meet and yet cannot remember what they are fighting over (just that it's the other one's fault). Sometimes it's a cousin who just up and disappeared one day leaving her husband and child behind. Or perhaps it's the nephew who's headed to jail, again, because he can't stop fighting. No matter what the size of the problem, all of our families are broken in some way.

But that will not stop Jesus. As Matthew's list of Jesus's family indicates, we celebrate tonight the birth of a child to a broken family. A child, God, who came to heal that brokenness. We welcome this child because we want, no because we *need* him to come into our brokenness and heal us, heal our families. We love this child because he so loved us that he willingly took on our brokenness in order to make us whole. This child truly is Emmanuel, God with us.