

What a Line!

Text: Matthew 1:1

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Christmastide II, January 3, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah...Matthew 1:1

On Christmas Eve after our two Christmas services here, Nancy and I went home and I turned the television on and watched midnight mass from St. Peter's. And this year I had the presence of mind when that was over to remember that Chicago is an hour behind us so I flipped to WGN and caught midnight mass at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. So, two services here and then two midnight masses. It's stuff like that that makes Nancy question my sanity! (Laughter) But I love to see the scenes and the sights of St. Peter's on Christmas Eve: the crowd such a diverse group, and the red-caped cardinals, (always wanted to be one of those.) and the magnificent sculpture of Bellini, and just that *space*. Well, it sort of makes Christmas Eve complete for me. There is always a commentator in English so that I can follow what the Holy Father is saying. And then sometimes they move the cameras away from the live action and show you different sights. This year they focused on some of the Italian crèches that are rather famous, paintings, and sculpture which are magnificent. The crèches at Christmas time are so much a part of the celebration - with the Christ Child in full halo and of course the Madonna, the Blessed Virgin, also in halo looking so wonderfully serene and peaceful. It's one of the most common expressions of Christian art. The halos, the serenity, the tranquility, the beauty of it all, the little infant with arms outstretched and smiling. "No crying he makes," of course. There is something heavenly about it.

But art has a way of glossing over the kind of harsh stark reality that is the actual story. There is some legitimacy in that. It does, I think, become a sign that points us to the heavenly dimension. But on the other hand the crèche scenes do obscure the reality of the situation. The squalor and poverty of a manger for instance. The hay not necessarily all yellow and sweet smelling as the choir sang on Christmas Eve but probably soiled a bit. Amongst steaming animal dung, came the wails of a woman, a bloody birth. That is the truth of the story. And sometimes, when we paint over the stark reality of the story, while it does point us to that heavenly

dimension and has a certain legitimacy, it also has the danger of distorting the real event and the real message.

In a recent book, *Born of a Woman*, a rather controversial Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong, has written that the nativity stories at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have, as a matter of fact, a way of distorting the reality. They have been, he says, the source of the subjugation and the subservience of women in the Church and in society by idealizing Mary, creating an image of Mary as the ideal woman. It's a rather interesting thesis that he sets forth. And when he looks at biblical material, he does have some basis, although one has to weigh it, and in places his hypothesis is certainly somewhat speculative.

He suggests, for example, that Jesus may have been married. Well, that wouldn't be any problem. At least not for Protestant bones, I guess. He suggests the possibility that he may have been married to Mary Magdalene. Now there he is somewhat on some solid ground. In the history of the Church, the Blessed Virgin, Mary Mother of Jesus, has the central place, but if you read the Gospel stories, the predominant figure of the Gospel narratives is Mary Magdalene. Why is she so important? Spong simply raises the question: could it have been that Jesus was married? Could it have been Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene? And then he asks a second question. Could it have been that Mary Magdalene was not the ideal woman and that the appending of those nativity stories as they were added to the Gospel record somewhat later, the appending of those stories might have intentionally removed Mary Magdalene from the center stage and replaced her there with the Blessed Virgin?

But when you read the Gospel story, Mary mother of Jesus doesn't play a terribly key role. You go to Mark 3:21 and you find this Jewish mother out after her son - she's going to drag Jesus home because they are saying, "This is a wild man." And he says, "Mother, get lost." John 7:2 is a similar reference. Mary does not play at all the central role in the Gospel narrative that she has played in the tradition of the Church, particularly the Roman Catholic tradition where that whole development of Marian doctrine has taken place.

Spong suggests that the Blessed Virgin is not an accurate portrait of Mary the mother of Jesus in the Gospel, but rather is the creation of the Church. What church? Well, of course, a male-dominated church, a male, celibate clergy. And the idealization of Mary as this Blessed Virgin was a rather safe woman for a celibate clergy to adore. Wouldn't every man want every woman to be docile, obedient and powerless? Now that's Mary according to the development of Marian dogma in the church. Here again Spong is on very solid ground.

In the late second century there was a Gospel of James that didn't pass muster for the canon, but it's one of those books - there were many such representative writings at the time - and in the Gospel of James, the whole story of Mary is told. Mary's birth to a very aged couple: Joseph and Anna. It was kind of a miraculous

birth. When she was very young she was dedicated and brought to the temple – sort of like Samuel – and she was raised by holy men in the temple. She had to get out of the temple before her puberty, of course, because the menstrual flow would pollute the temple. Again, a denigration of womanhood in its genuinely human state. Mary was given to an aged widower, Joseph, who had children from his previous marriage. To this aged widower Mary was entrusted and thereby her perpetual virginity was ensured. Because, in the teaching of the Western Catholic Church, it is not simply that Mary gave birth to Jesus as a virgin, but that her virginity was perpetual. And so the Gospel records speaking of Jesus' brothers and sisters are written off as referring to the stepchildren of Mary, the children of Joseph by his first wife. All of this is common church tradition and accepted by many as historical fact.

In the continuing development of the Blessed Virgin in the tradition of the Church we have then Mary's perpetual virginity and, as a matter of fact, even the teaching on the part of some that Mary's hymen was not broken in the birth of Jesus. There was not even the disruption of the birth canal in Mary. She was spared the "taint" of anything having to do with sexuality, her womanhood, in the bearing of this child. In so doing, the Church was removing Mary from common human womanhood and thereby also removing Jesus from the stuff that is part and parcel of our human experience. Mary was never allowed the intimacy and the ecstasy of the sexual relationship. Her sexuality was something that was not allowed because, in the development of the early Catholic dogma, sexuality was identified with sin and with guilt. And one of the major shapers of *this* was Saint Augustine, who was a great theologian and a great Christian, but had serious problems because of his own youthful profligacy. He identified sin with the sexual union and through the sexual union original sin was passed on from one generation to another. That whole thing has shaped Christian understanding and Christian doctrine more than you might realize.

Saint Jerome, the translator of the Latin *Vulgate* argued strenuously against the possibility that the married state was equal to the celibate state for man or for woman. The whole monastic development in the Catholic Church, the monasteries and the convents were a reflection of the highest spirituality that was attributed to the celibate state. Mary becomes the epitome of this sexless human, drained of its reality and all of its genuineness. When Spong speaks about this ideal woman: docile, obedient and powerless, he is on strong grounds historically. This is the image and it is a distorted image. It's not faithful to the Gospel record itself, and its impact has been considerable.

Actually the Marian dogma has continued to grow into this present century, although most acute Catholic theologians will have very little to do with it today. But it was only in 1854 that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was promulgated by Pope Pius IX, and it was in 1950 that the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven was promulgated by Pope Pius XII: the doctrine which determined that Mary, holy as she was, would not have died a normal

death. So you can see that in the history of the Church there has been a strong movement away from the biblical picture of Mary the mother of Jesus to this kind of idealized woman, spiritualized and drained of her genuine, full, humanness. Spong says that this image has been fed by the nativity pictures. And its development has been a major instrument for the subjugation of women, with refusal to give women positions of authority and leadership in the church. And such a perception of the ideal woman has spilled over into larger society, resulting in subjugation in the secular realm as well. And I think probably that point cannot be contended.

But the interesting thing, and my point this morning, is that, in viewing Mary thus, we lose the wonder and glory of the grace of God that came to expression in Mary and in Mary's son Jesus, our Lord. If only the Church had read again the genealogy of Matthew, it would have known that the Immaculate Conception was a ridiculous matter. You know the Immaculate Conception has nothing to do with the conception of Jesus. The Immaculate Conception in Catholic dogma has to do with the conception of Mary. Mary's conception was immaculate they say (in other words, "without sin") in order that she might be a pure vessel to carry the Godhead, Jesus. And so they moved the whole deal back one generation in order to avoid the "taint" of original sin for the Virgin Mary. But, as a matter of fact, all you do is remove it one step back.

The Gospel of Matthew would tell us that, if you would go back far enough, you have some line for Jesus. Matthew's genealogy, like all biblical genealogies, was put together with a specific theological purpose in mind. If you compare Luke's genealogy and Matthew's genealogy, you cannot possibly harmonize them. They are totally different lines. The genealogy of Matthew, any biblical genealogy, makes no attempt to give the exact order right on down the generations. They are always constructed to make a certain point. And Matthew, writing to a Jewish Christian community that was receiving Gentiles into its fellowship, told the story of Jesus to this Jewish Christian community in order to show them that it had long been the intention of God that the Gentiles should be included into this fellowship of God's people. Matthew goes back to David and back to Abraham. He says to David, "To you of Israel, yes indeed, Jesus was the Messiah, the one promised, the one who would come to be like David. And then he goes back to Abraham so he can say, "and he comes from Abraham from whom God said, 'And all nations of the earth shall be blessed.'" So he goes back to particular ancestors of the Messiah, to David and to the universal covenant of grace with Abraham, and that is his purpose in putting together this genealogy in this way.

If you would look at Luke, chapter 3, you would find that Luke starts with Jesus and weaves his way all the way back to Adam, Son of God, because Luke's gospel was not for a Jewish Christian community, it was for a Gentile community. Luke was also trying to say Jesus came as the Savior of all people, and so he brings it all the way back through David, through Abraham, all the way to Adam to say he was the universal Savior.

But, back to Matthew. His purpose is to connect Jesus to the messianic promise in David, and the covenant promise in Abraham. But in the meantime he mentions four women. That in itself is unusual. There are four women mentioned in the genealogical table in Matthew, chapter 1. Who are they? *Tamar*. Do you know who Tamar is? She was the daughter-in-law of Judah, founder of the tribe of Judah. She married the son of Judah. The Bible says that son was wicked and he died. So then Judah's daughter-in-law is without a husband. The law of Levite marriage in Israel said that in that case the next son must take this woman in order that seed might be raised up to the brother who is dead. But the next son doesn't cooperate. His name is Onan. He intentionally spills his seed on the ground and for this he dies. God's judgment. Judah says, "Hmmm. This woman Tamar, there is something deadly about that woman!" He's got one more boy, but he thinks, "I am not going to risk my last son with Tamar." So he says, "Tamar, cool your heels. Go back and live with your father and when my youngest son is old enough I will give him to you." Well she waits and she waits, and she waits, and nothing happens. One day she learns that this youngest son is a full adult and realizes Judah is procrastinating. He is not being honest with her. So what does she do? She hears that Judah is going to go down where the sheep are being sheared and she goes along the highway and sets up a little booth...of prostitution. Judah, not realizing the woman in the tent is Tamar (for she has disguised herself and it has been a while since he has seen her), enjoys himself with her for an evening. And out of their union there is a pregnancy. Word comes to Judah, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant." He says, "Bring the whore out, we'll burn her." But she is an intelligent and clever woman. Tamar had managed to slip Judah's ring off his finger, and she pulls it out and says, "It's true, but the one who did it owns this ring." Judah said, "Oh, my goodness. She's more righteous than I," for he knew he had not fulfilled the legal obligation to her. And he honors her. And so Tamar is in the line of Jesus Christ.

Rahab. Did you ever hear of Rahab? She lived in Jericho when Joshua, "Fit the battle of Jericho," and he sent some spies in to reconnoiter the city. They heard about this happy brothel run by Rahab and they went there and their presence was discovered. Rahab, always equal to the moment, hid them up on the roof. The king called up and said, "Any men there?" She said, "Oh they were, but they are on their way." When they were gone she went up and said, "Now you boys are going to come in with the army and, when you come in, spare me and my family." They said, "Well, put a scarlet cord in the window, and that will be the sign." Rahab managed to save her family when the walls of Jericho fell down. Rahab, the Canaanite, is in the line of Jesus.

And then there was *Ruth*. Ruth was a Moabitess. There was an Israelite couple that went to Moab during a famine in Bethlehem in order to find food. Naomi was the woman. Her husband later died and her two sons also had died and left her alone with their Moabite wives, one of whom was Ruth. Naomi said, "I am going back home to Bethlehem." And Ruth said, "I'll go with you." Naomi said, "Oh, don't go with me. Stay here." She said, "No. Where you go I will go, where

you dwell I will dwell, your God will be my God.” Wonderful story of Ruth in the book by her name. And once back in Bethlehem Ruth starts gleaning in the field of Boaz. Boaz was a wealthy old critter, and he notices Ruth one day. Naomi, sly old fox, she sees Boaz eyeing Ruth. And one night when Boaz was going down to the threshing floor where they were going to do the harvest, Naomi said, “Ruth, my dear, take a bath. Put on some Esté Lauder, (Laughter) your finest gown and go see Boaz. Wait until he has eaten well and had a couple of nightcaps. Note the place where he lies down to sleep and join him.” Simple as that! And Ruth and Boaz eventually marry and have a son, Obid, who had a son Jesse, who had a son David, whose greater son was Jesus Christ our Lord.

And then, of course, also listed is the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Do you remember her name? *Bathsheba*. David looked at her, longed for her, took her, illicitly. She became pregnant and consequently David had to have her husband killed so he could take her as his wife. She bore a child but he died as a punishment from God. But she bore another son and his name was Solomon. As David lay dying she pleaded on behalf of her son and, although Solomon was not in the line of succession, David arranged things so that Solomon succeeded him on the throne.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba: all in the line of Jesus according to Matthew. It's unusual to begin with that there would be women mentioned at all, but what was Matthew's point? Raymond Brown, the great Catholic New Testament scholar, has a big thick book entitled *The Birth of a Messiah*, and he has a section there, “Why Bring on the Ladies?” He gives a couple of reasons that have traditionally been put forward, but finally gives the consensus of opinion, and it is this: There are two things that these women have in common. Number one: they are foreigners. And to a Jewish Christian community this word of Matthew to them was, “Look, the Messiah himself is the product of mixed blood. Canaanites, Moabites, Hittites. Where do you get this blue blood, this pure blood line stuff?” And, secondly, in every one of the cases there was something irregular and extraordinary about the union of these women with their partners. *In each case the women took initiative*. They showed ingenuity and they furthered the purposes of God. God blesses them even though their ways were contrary to that which was the acceptable standard of behavior. And in 1854 one part of the Christian Church was worried about the Immaculate Conception of Jesus.

Matthew would have told them that Jesus came from some line. You go home this afternoon and read Genesis 38, Joshua 2, the Book of Ruth, and II Samuel 11 and 12, and you'll have more interesting reading than the pro football playoffs could possibly compete with. (Laughter) Something that would compete well with whatever soaps you would want to watch tomorrow. (Laughter) You see, Jesus Christ came into the grimy, grubby, humanity of which you are all a part.

The Church has done us a terrible disservice by making it all sound so squeaky clean, draining it of all of its life blood, its vitality and its reality, making the blessed Virgin this ideal woman, this docile, passive, powerless, obedient one.

Making Jesus somehow or other come out of some pure vessel in order that he might not be tainted with the common human humanity that we all share together. Now if we would listen to the scriptural record itself, if we would simply take Matthew's word, then we would have to acknowledge that Jesus came from a line that had all of the ingredients in it that makes up the life and the tapestry of the lives of all. And that is the glory of the Gospel. Matthew was trying to say to the Jew, "Look, he came from David. He is the Messiah, the one you have been looking for." He tried to say to the Gentile, "Look, he came from Abraham, the covenant of grace for all people." He tried to say to male domination, "He came from women who took initiative, who took ingenuity, who moved and shook in order to further the purposes of God." And more than that. He says to us all, "He comes from the kind of stock that you come from with all of its light and all of its shadow." The red-blooded reality of the incarnation of the word is the flesh of Jesus Christ constituted of the stuff that we are all constituted of. He came into the world a Savior for the likes of us because he was in every respect made like his brothers and sisters. So says the writer to the Hebrews. And the greatest wonder of the Gospel and of the Christmas story is this. Jesus came into our ordinary human stuff with the powerful grace to transform us - everyone.

There is a Christian organization that has very strict rules for its leadership. If you are a member of this organization and your life's story has left you somewhat crippled and tainted, scarred and broken, then you may be a part of this fellowship but you may not be a leader. To be a leader, for example, you may not drink in public. Oh, a glass of wine at your own table with the shades down, but not out in a restaurant. That is hypocrisy! That is dishonesty! I would never be a part of an organization that said that I could be any different in my own home than I can be in the marketplace of the world because my Savior comes out of the marketplace - out of a manger of soiled hay with steaming animal dung - with a peasant maid all bloody and wailing. This organization says you may not be in a position of leadership if you have been divorced. You may not even be in a position of leadership if you, God forbid, should marry a divorcee. I remember a dear aunt of mine after my divorce when she learned that I was going to marry Nancy, she said, "Why did he have to marry a divorced woman?" Someone reminded her that I was divorced. And she said, "Oh, well, yes, but do you have to multiply the sin?" (Laughter) I mean, wasn't there some chaste virgin somewhere in Israel? (Laughter) Well, for twenty years it was a good choice.

No, good friends, the Church has not been honest. The Church hasn't told the truth. The Church has idealized some figment of the imagination and it has robbed us of the wonder and the glory of the Gospel that reaches us where we are - human, human as we are! The ambiguity of our personhood, transformed by the grace of God, never loomed so large as in the Christmas story where Jesus is born of Mary, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. I wonder, do you think that Matthew included those women because he was aware of the fact that there were serious rumors going around about Mary, about a birth out of wedlock? I suspect that may be true. Maybe he was trying to say, "Look, God doesn't operate

according to the rules of your pomp and piety, your self-righteousness and holier than thou attitude, that disqualifies people and cuts them out. God has been operating all the time in this kind of questionable manner, with the likes of Tamar and Ruth and Bathsheba, so Mary is no exception.”

I think God has a wonderful sense of humor. I think God must have marvelous belly laughs at all of the pretensions of our piety and pomposity. The wise men knew there was a star that marked a significant birth and a cosmic event. So they thought, we'll stop in Jerusalem at the palace, someplace having to do with the king. Little did they know it wasn't Jerusalem but Bethlehem, not the palace but a stable, not the king but a peasant girl. One of these days when I move from life through death to life eternal and I have a free afternoon, I am going to invite Mary to lunch. And I am going to look her in the eye and I am going to say, “Come on now, Mary, what really happened?” And I am going to invite as accompanying guests, Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba. And don't you think we'll have a time. (Laughter) Do you want to come too?

Isn't it good news! Don't ever let anyone tell you that anything that you've ever been, or anything that you have ever done, or any record you've written in the story of your life disqualifies you from being an instrument in the grace of God - a beloved child of God - forgiven, cleansed, made whole. Because God the great lover has been about this business and will be until he brings us all home. That's the wonder of Christmas. That's the Gospel. Thank God.

Reference:

John Shelby Spong. *Born of a Woman*. HarperSanFrancisco, reprint edition, 1994.