

## THE GRAPEVINE – Issue 10:21st May 2020

Dear Friends,

I have been grateful during the lockdown to have more time to read, and particularly the gospels. As I read the beginning of Matthew's gospel the other day it made me reflect again on the genealogy of Jesus and why all the names are included. It is not surprising that in a patriarchal society most of the names are of men. But there are some rather shady characters, and they're women. There are five women mentioned. In a time when genealogies didn't normally contain even a single female name, why are the women included you might ask?

The list begins with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But then, wait a minute, what is Tamar doing there? Didn't she solicit sex with her father-in-law, and wasn't that how Perez, her son, was conceived?

The story goes like this: Jacob's son Judah had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Tamar married Er, but then Er died, leaving her a widow. Since it was required that the next of kin care for a brother's widow, Tamar was given to Onan, but he also died. Shelah was still young and therefore couldn't marry Tamar, so Judah told her to return to her father's house and wait until Shelah had grown up. However, once Shelah was old enough, Judah didn't honour his promise. Tamar remained an unmarried widow. Tamar was stuck in a very difficult place; because she had been returned to her father's house to wait for Shelah, she had no status, no inheritance, no social security would ever come her way because her only route to a future was through children and she was not a mother. She was not eligible to remarry since she was 'waiting' for Shelah. So, she took matters into her own hands. She went into town disguised as a prostitute, tricked Judah, and got him to sleep with her. She then became pregnant by Judah and gave birth to twin sons, Perez and Zerah (Gen 38).

Judah had sought an irresponsible sexual encounter. Tamar was seeking to protect her future and even his, by providing a child who would live and produce offspring. In a culture when women had few rights, Tamar invested in the future. It is amazing that in an age when only the men got a mention in genealogies Matthew acknowledges Tamar and four other women.

I once had a phone call from a lady who was very distressed. She shared her life story with me. She was so full of guilt about her troubled history, and struggled to grasp the fact that God loved her despite her past. She finally plucked up the courage to ask a question: "Can I be part of the family of God despite what I have done?" Of course, the answer to that has to be YES!

Five women are included mostly poor, mostly misfits, widows, unimportant, unknown, sinful women who changed the course of history by their simple, obedient lives. You would expect the women in Jesus' genealogy to have been the finest Jewish women, but they weren't. Most weren't even Jewish, and some had tarnished histories. They were ordinary women, trying to get life right, but missing the mark. In other words, they were just like us: ordinary, often damaged, unlikely to shape the course of history. I think they are in Jesus' genealogy to give us hope, and to remind us of the kind of people Jesus came to save. I heard the scientist Francis Collins on the radio today say, "The only thing more infectious than a virus is hope."

You and I are part of the family of God despite what has happened. You might be like Judah – deliberate in your rebellion, or like Tamar – making decisions out of desperation. You might know people like the Judahs and the Tamars. But these are the names that appear in the genealogy of the family of God, and like them we can put our whole future into the hands of God, as he offers to fill our simple, damaged lives with great significance and hope.

**God bless you all**

