

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Every year at the Advent Mass on December 17, we listen to Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus: "A family record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez..." (Mt 1:1-17). Few readings seem more boring, as the lector goes on and on reciting 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 more from David to the Babylonian Exile, and 14 more from the Exile to Christ.

But a careful eye will note that, in many ways, Matthew's symmetrically constructed account of Jesus' genealogy is much more subtle than a casual observer might think. Contrary to the patriarchal mentality of the time, for example, Matthew has inserted four women into the long list of men — a curious, but fascinating innovation. Who are these women? Why are they there? What do they tell us about Advent?

Matthew's readers must certainly have been jolted by finding Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba on the list. They might even have blushed when they saw Tamar's name. You remember that the Book of Genesis (38:15ff) recounts that she pretended to be a harlot and seduced her father-in-law, Judah. The twins born of their illicit union, Perez and Zerah, are precisely the names which appear as Jesus' ancestors.

First-century Christians probably had mixed, but much more favorable reactions to the inclusion of Rahab on the list. She was a prostitute, as the Book of Joshua attests (cf. Jos 2:1ff), but the New Testament praises her for her faith and good works (cf. Heb 11:31 and Jas 2:25). She hid the Israelite spies who had infiltrated Jericho, thus facilitating the capture of the city. When the walls came tumbling down (Jos 6:20), only Rahab and her family were spared. We know nothing about Salmon, who is listed as the father of her child, but one wonders whether he was one of the clients in her prostitution trade.

Of the four women, Ruth comes off by far the best in the scriptures. All of us recall the wonderful fidelity of this foreigner to her Jewish mother-in-law. Rather than abandon Naomi, Ruth declares: "Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die and there be buried" (Ru 1:16-17). So Ruth

accompanies Naomi from the Plains of Moab to Bethlehem where her mother-in-law introduces her to a relative named Boaz, whom she weds. The child of this mixed marriage, Obed, becomes the grandfather of David the king.

The most shocking, both to Matthew's contemporaries and to us today, is the fourth woman in the genealogy. Matthew discreetly does not mention her name, describing her simply as Uriah's wife. The infamous Bathsheba, as we remember, committed adultery with David, who then, in an attempt to hide her pregnancy, called her husband back from battle and tried to induce him to have sexual relations with her. When the courageous Uriah abstained (for religious reasons!), David had him murdered (cf. 2 Sam 11:11ff). After mourning her husband's death briefly (2 Sam 11:26), Bathsheba quickly took up residence with David and gave birth to their child, who died almost immediately. Their second child was Solomon, renowned for his wisdom. But Solomon, heedless of the Lord's admonition (1 Kgs 11:1ff), chased after countless foreign women (he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, the Book of Kings tells us!), and they turned his heart away from the God of Israel. It is his name, from among David's children, that appears on the list of Jesus' ancestors.

None of these women's names are found in Luke's genealogy of Jesus. Why did Matthew include them? What does their presence on the list say to us this Advent?

Basically, Matthew wants to tell us that God's Spirit guides human history. God uses the unexpected to bring his plans to fulfillment. Human history is not a linear chain of events that lead to a predictable conclusion. It involves sin and conversion, successes and failures, heroes and villains. But God's providence rules over history. It makes crooked ways straight and rough ways smooth. And ultimately, God's love prevails, as revealed in the person of Jesus.

It also seems clear that Matthew has a second motive for inserting these four women into the otherwise all-male genealogy. They are all Gentiles. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba was probably a Hittite. Their presence on the list foreshadows the role of the Messiah, who opens God's saving plan to the Gentiles. Matthew is stating that Gentiles are part of Jesus' lineage and part of his future.

This Advent let me offer you two Vincentian reflections on this highly unusual reading:

1. More and more, as his life went on, St. Vincent pondered the mystery of God's providence. Trust in providence became one of the keystones in his spirituality. He writes to Jean Barreau in 1648: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor,

in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ” (SV III, 392). Vincent was utterly convinced that for those who love God and seek to do his will, “all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). He tells Louise de Marillac: “In the name of God, let us not be surprised at anything. God will do everything for the best” (SV III, 213). Vincent believes that God governs history and that nothing eludes his power, that there is a guiding plan, beyond our comprehension, which gives meaning to life’s events. For Vincent, those who trust in providence find meaning in the polarities of human existence: light and darkness, grace and sin, peace and violence, plan and disruption, health and sickness, life and death.

Like Matthew, Vincent stood with reverent trust before the mystery of God, as revealed in Christ, in whom life, death and resurrection are integrated. Matthew was able to see God working through Tamar’s seduction of her father-in-law, through the collusion of Rahab the harlot with Israel’s spies, through Ruth the Moabite’s unexpected union with Boaz the Jew, through David and Bathsheba’s adultery. Vincent too trusted deeply in God’s “hidden plan” (cf. Col 2:2-3), even as he experienced the death of missionaries he sent to Madagascar, the religious wars in Lorraine, the connivings of Cardinal Mazarin, the turbulent masses of neglected poor in Paris.

This Advent I encourage you to ponder the mystery of providence, both in your own life and in the wider history of humanity today. Do we, like St. Vincent, trust deeply that a loving, personal God guides each of us as well as the events of contemporary history, even the tragic ones? That is surely an enormous challenge as we see wars and threats of war, continued terrorist attacks, and forms of poverty and sickness that human resources today really could overcome, but that the will of the world fails to tackle.

2. This Advent I also ask you to lift up your eyes toward the ends of the earth. Embrace the universalism that Matthew subtly introduces into Jesus’ genealogy by inserting two Canaanites, a Moabite, and a Hittite into the line of Jesus ancestors. Matthew continues this theme with the story of the Magi, Gentiles who come from the East to adore the newborn Lord. And he concludes his gospel with the rousing universal missionary mandate: “Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of *all nations*. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you and know that *I am with you* always, until the end of the world!” (Mt 28:18-20). Interestingly, this farewell command combines both universalism (“all nations”) and providence (“I am with you”).

In recent years our Vincentian Family has grown rapidly, spreading to many countries on all continents. In the 21st century, our international meetings will show a growing number of Asians, Pacific Islanders, Africans, and Latin Americans, who will stand alongside Europeans and North Americans as the members of a truly global family. Those whose skin is black, brown, yellow, red and white will work next to one another in projects serving the poor. They will sit beside each other doing research into the causes of poverty. They will serve with one another in lay missions sponsored by MISEVI. They will pray with each other and sing with each other in Eucharistic celebrations. I hope that the multiracial character of our Vincentian Family in the 21st century will be a clear witness to the unity of the human race and that it will be a continual font of richness for us all, rather than a source of prejudice.

As our newly published *Ratio Missionum* points out, the missionary must be alert to the “seeds of the Word” embedded in various cultures throughout the world and must patiently and perseveringly enter into intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Only through trustful dialogue can the wounds of divided Christendom be healed and the violence that has so often erupted among Christians, Muslims and Jews be quelled.

Matthew’s seemingly boring genealogy offers a very relevant challenge today: do we remain insulated, as Matthew feared was the case among many of his readers? Are we so caught up in our own work or in our own province that we rarely raise our eyes to the larger world of the poor on other continents and to our brothers and sisters who are serving them there? Do we sense ourselves as members of a worldwide Family and live in active solidarity with those who are even poorer than we are, sharing with them our affective and effective love, some portion of our material goods, and our prayer?

Those are my thoughts this Advent. With you, in the spirit of Matthew’s gospel, I pray that this Christmas might be a time of peaceful trust in God’s providence for all of us, that as servants of the poor we ourselves might be signs of that same loving providence for others, and that as a missionary Family we might give ourselves generously to the universal mission of the newborn Lord.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General