Sermon for 31st in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Isaiah 1:10-18; Luke 19:1-10

i

Zacchaeus the tax collector climbing up a sycamore tree is one of the Bible’s best loved stories; it is especially a favourite of children who can identify with the little man who can’t see what is going on for all the adults in the way. But there is far more to this familiar tale than a good children’s story.

Firstly, we note that Zacchaeus was attracted by Jesus and he was so keen to get a glimpse of him passing by that he was prepared to climb a tree like a young child and make himself look silly, rather than miss the opportunity.

On the other hand, however, it seems that Zacchaeus was eager to get a look at Jesus, but he was equally hoping to catch a glimpse from a safe distance, unnoticed up in the tree. As we know, the crowd is amazed and somewhat scandalised at the way Jesus speaks to Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector, and then actually goes into the man’s house.

Tax collectors were believed to be both corrupt and also traitors for dealing directly with the Roman tax system, or even working with Jewish authorities which were deemed to be collaborating. They were unclean for touching coins that had been through many unclean hands (in the ritual sense of unclean). Tax collectors were social outcasts. They may have been wealthy, but they didn’t have many friends.

We will come back later in the sermon to wonder **why** Zacchaeus was so keen to see Jesus and why Jesus may have invited himself to tea.

ii

Zacchaeus symbolised Judaism in the first century. He had compromised with Rome for material benefit, but he was still attracted by the idea of God and of being the covenant people.

Jesus comes along and offers to Zacchaeus and his generation the opportunity to change their priorities. He offers to restore this man whom Jesus later describes as “also a son of Abraham” (v9).

Zacchaeus was restored to the people because he responded to the offer of renewal made by Jesus graciously coming to his house. We recall the words in John’s Gospel: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23).

Zacchaeus’ response is one of contrition. His confession is not empty words, but a real change of heart that manifests itself in the action he immediately takes: he will give half of his great wealth away to the poor and repay anyone he has cheated fourfold the amount! So the gracious acceptance of Jesus, who reaches out to those dismissed and scorned by the world, has brought salvation to Zacchaeus in the same way the whole nation could find renewal if they also were prepared to repent and receive Jesus.

Luke includes this story of Zacchaeus the tax collector, whereas the story is not recorded by the other Evangelists. Perhaps Luke is keen to include the story because he sees in it a remarkable contrast to another well-known story – that of the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18 (also Matthew 19 and Mark 10).

The Rich Young Ruler has all the outward signs of righteousness, he claims to have kept all the commandments, and yet he goes away forlorn and lost because unlike Zacchaeus, he is not willing to change his priorities in the same real, deep, existential way that Zacchaeus has a change of heart. The Rich Young Ruler wants to have Jesus’ promise of eternal life and hold on to his worldly wealth as well. So the unclean, cheating Zacchaeus is let in to the kingdom whilst the outwardly pious, but insincere Young Ruler remains outside.

It is another version of the *Prodigal Son* story in which the rebellious, selfish, catastrophically unsuccessful younger son comes home to his father because he has seen the error of his ways and for the first time in his life starts acting like a son, despite knowing he’s only fit to be treated like a slave, whilst the outwardly dutiful elder son who thinks he’s worthy of being a son, actually behaves like a slave [See Sermon…].

Luke the Gentile is eager to show the irony of the Gospel: the pious, but unrepentant Jews miss out on God’s long-promised salvation whilst the pagan gentiles come flooding into the kingdom.

iii

Let us now return to that question I left hanging in the air earlier: **why** was Zacchaeus so keen to see Jesus passing by?

There is an interesting possibility that we find in other early Christian tradition outside the New Testament.

Clement of Alexandria claims that Zacchaeus received a new name upon coming to faith. This would be following the same pattern as Simon becoming Peter and Saul becoming Paul. Changing names upon baptism is a practice that survived into modern times.

Clement tells us that the name by which Zacchaeus became more widely known after this conversion experience in Jericho was *Matthias*. This is the same Matthias, we are told, as became the 12th Apostle who replaced Judas Iscariot. In Acts1:21-23 Luke tells us that Matthias was with Jesus at the beginning when Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan.

Could Zacchaeus/Matthias have been there? It is certainly possible. Matthew the tax collector became one of the disciples.

We also know from John 6:60-66 that many of Jesus’ early disciples abandoned Jesus when the going started to get a bit tough. So is this story about Jesus giving Zacchaeus another chance?

It would certainly explain why Zacchaeus was both so desperately keen to see Jesus and at the same time hope to hide away in the branches of a tree.

It would also explain how Jesus knew Zacchaeus’ name.

Further Christian tradition claims that Zacchaeus became the first bishop of Caesarea and married St Veronica, who wiped Jesus’ face as he carried the cross to Golgotha. He reputedly ended his life as a hermit in the Bordeaux region of France.

It is difficult to know how much credence to give to some of these later sources, but the idea that Zacchaeus had been an early disciple and later became the apostle Matthias, does cast an intriguing light on a familiar tale.

iv

We may or we may not share Zacchaeus’ diminutive stature, but whoever we are, there are certain things we may have in common with him.

Like him we may be attracted by the idea of God, but compromised with the lure of worldly interests. It is amazing how many Christians so quickly drop Church whenever it clashes with a sporting event, Christmas shopping, or a visiting relative. At the very least we should learn from Zacchaeus that the gracious invitation of Jesus demands a real, profound response. Christianity doesn’t work as a spectator sport or hobby.

Like Zacchaeus we might be interested, but want to hide in the background. Some want Jesus, but don’t want the Church. Occasionally you find people who for some reason still want the Church but don’t want God. We should learn from Zacchaeus there is no way to the kingdom that doesn’t pass through Christ. Jesus confronts all of us and asks to come into our lives. We can say no, but that doesn’t mean Jesus won’t unexpectedly turn up again another day and ask the same question.

Like Zacchaeus we might be wary of Jesus because we sense the challenge a true encounter would involve. Repentance isn’t a very popular theme today; it supposedly puts people off coming to Church to talk about sin. Trouble is - most of us are aware we cannot avoid the subject because it is part of our lives. A Church that is too frightened to talk about sin is likely to be equally silent about dealing with it. Meeting Jesus will and should transform our lives. Of course that’s scary; but new life merits taking the plunge.

We need to have the courage to be more like Zacchaeus and less like the Rich Young Ruler.

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