

Pentecost 21
30/10/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 119:137-144
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Luke 19:1-10

Seeing Zacchaeus

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

This story must be one of the most vivid, and memorable stories in the Gospels. Children love it and remember it, Sunday School plays used to be made of it and we could all happily believe it is just a tale, a diversion from the serious stuff in the Gospel. The reality is that it is a meticulously formed story in Luke's carefully constructed two-volume proclamation of God's plan for humankind in Jesus.

So I thought we'd examine the text in a bible study this morning and perhaps discover more than we did when we were young. The verses are all set out in your service sheet.

The trouble with **lectionaries** is that they chop a biblical book into small chunks, and place them alongside three others which may well also have the gospel we need to hear for the day. We regularly lose our place in the stories. So let's begin by stepping back and seeing where today's chunk fits.

Today's story has its beginning back as far as chapter 9, when, after the transfiguration, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Jericho is the last stop on that line, 20 km to go. But Luke has been *theologically* leading his readers on this journey too. At the end of the last chapter (18), he gives us (v.31-) the *third* prediction of Jesus's passion, three sounding gongs in his narrative about what will happen in Jerusalem, and how it will be the fulfilment of prophecy regarding Jesus.

Jesus is not just walking by himself; he is part of a great crowd 'going up' to the Holy City for the Passover festival. As they approached Jericho, he meets a blind beggar who calls out to 'Jesus, Son of David' and when asked what he wants he says, 'I want my sight back' and he receives it, instantly. And all present praise God for it.

So, let's now follow the text in my favourite translation, from the *Revised English Bible*, which replaced the NEB in 1989.

1 Entering Jericho Jesus made his way through the city.

2 There was a man there named Zacchaeus; he was superintendent of taxes and very rich.

All we need to know about Zacchaeus in one line! Older translations say he was a 'Chief Tax Collector', the only such one mentioned in the NT. He is in charge of other tax collectors ('superintendent') and will have added to his income from them. In short, he belonged to the most despised section of Jewish society.

3 He was eager to see what Jesus looked like; but, being a little man, he could not see him for the crowd.

'See' in the sense of wanting to observe this man, not to consult him. But there is one more fact: Zacchaeus was 'of small stature' [*helikia mikros*] and couldn't see for all the regular-sized folk in front.

4 So he ran on ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see him, for he was to pass that way.

Sycamore trees are good for climbing: they have a sturdy trunk and spreading branches, but they also have abundant foliage. Peter's graphic looks right!

5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, be quick and come down, for I must stay at your house today.'

Leafy or not, Jesus spied him, almost as if he expected to see him. Jesus already knew his name. Notice that Jesus says he 'must' stay with him – not just for a meal, but for a B&B on the journey to Jerusalem too. There is a sense that the Abba God compels him to stay.

The crowd would have spotted him. He will have been conspicuously well-dressed, and the sight of him shimmying up a tree invited sniggers. He may have hoped to 'see' Jesus, slither down and vanish unseen. Not likely.

6 He climbed down as quickly as he could and welcomed him gladly.

Both verses 5 and 6 speak of 'hurry', 'quickly', which is intended to highlight the urgency of Jesus' summons and of Zacchaeus's obedience. (We might remember the haste of another rich man in robes, running to greet his prodigal son. That too was undignified and unexpected.) Zacchaeus' welcome of Jesus hardly suggests reluctance.

7 At this there was a general murmur of disapproval. 'He has gone in to be a guest of a sinner,' they said.

Suddenly the mood changes and the fickle crowd turns on Jesus and this is not the only time we hear this criticism. Jesus (in Luke) is often in the company of 'tax collectors and sinners.' It is part of Jesus' divine mandate to sit with sinners. Such actions belong in the kingdom which is breaking in.

8 But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Here and now, sir, I give half my possessions to charity; and if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay him four times over.'

However successfully he descended from the tree, Zacchaeus doesn't care. He 'stood there', calm and composed before his critics. And his first words are what the NT calls 'fruits worthy of repentance' - though there is no other sign of his penitence. He is, from that moment, giving half of all his goods to the poor and a four-fold restoration to those he has defrauded. Now, the degrees of compensation are laid down in Jewish law (it's all there in Leviticus 6: 1-5): Zacchaeus' offer exceeds the legal requirement. He chooses to relinquish his very profession and embraces a considerable drop in economic status. By contrast, in the previous chapter (Lk 18: 22-24), we have just heard of a rich young ruler who sadly turned away from the kingdom because of his great wealth.

9 Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house – for this man too is a son of Abraham.'

It would be possible to describe Luke's Gospel as dedicated to showing the restoration of all the children of Abraham to their rightful relationships. Abraham's children have been scattered, exiled, lost in biblical history; in Luke they are being gathered in once again, not least women and children – and even Gentiles. Compassion marks Luke's Gospel.

Included are include the blind beggar (19:35f), the tax collector (!) praying alongside the Pharisee (18:8f) and earlier, the crippled woman in the synagogue who is healed on the sabbath day, who is called 'a daughter of Abraham' (13:10f). Zacchaeus has demonstrated that he has come home.

Two notes to end on.

Jesus says ‘salvation has come to this *house*’ and it’s worth remembering that Zacchaeus’ ‘house’ now includes all those who have suffered by him, but also his family and his slaves. Zacchaeus continues to be their guardian and benefactor, in a very different spirit – as kin under the God of Abraham, through Jesus.

And ‘**salvation**’ may begin here with one man’s conversion, but it has personal, domestic, social and economic dimensions. The biblical word can be translated as ‘made well’ or ‘healed’. The whole of life is embraced by Jesus’ ministry, and all who follow him have a foretaste of the coming reign of God.

The meeting of this little man with the very Word of God incarnate is not a diverting tale in a larger story: it *is* the larger story.

10 The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what is lost.’
