

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

Bad or Misunderstood?

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

I don't think I am racist or sexist. I certainly try not to be. And yet I must admit that I am conscious of race and gender differences whenever I am relating to another person. I am aware of the different things appropriate to my speech and behavior according to the other or others in any interaction. Do we not do this all the time. Are we not particularly aware of this as we are bombarded by news local and international conflicts fueled by human racial, political and religious differences.

The Melbourne scholar, Brendan Byrne, offers a startling new reading to this story about Zacchaeus. In his commentary on the gospel of Luke called *The Hospitality of God* Fr Byrne's reading of the text suggests that Zacchaeus was not a bad man who became good, but that he was always a good man who was sadly misunderstood. The whole problem lies in the tense of the verbs..

This is not the conventional view. Digby Hannah's children's hymn gives the traditional view – "There once was a man as mean as could be; if he could take two then he'd try to take three. Then one day he took Jesus for tea: and Jesus helped him to change."

Luke tells how Jesus was passing through Jericho and there was a large crowd. Zacchaeus, chief tax collector, and known around town as shorty, wanted to see Jesus because everyone else was taller than him. No one was going to make way for Shorty the tax collector in a crowd seeking to see and hear Jesus who proclaims God's salvation. If he was to get a look-in, he must abandon any self-dignity. He climbed a tree. This was not the behaviour of a man who aspires to stature and wealth. This was a man desperate to see salvation.

Jesus stopped under the tree and called Zacchaeus down because he was to stay at his house that day. To the chagrin and horror of the good people of Jericho the visiting celebrity chose hospitality from Shorty the tax collector. Tax collectors were sinners because they worked for the Romans, the occupying force.

Zacchaeus hurried down and made a marvelous speech. Zacchaeus said: (here comes the problem with the tense of the verbs) the translators say "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Naturally that makes sense to have the speech using the future tense – Zacchaeus has been a rotten cheating tax collector and when he was brought face to face with Jesus he changed and made retribution for his past. He will do the right thing to make amends.

Brendan Byrne reminds his readers that the speech in Greek is not future tense at all, but present tense. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I defraud anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much." It is as if the translators have joined with the socially prejudices Jerichoites and judged Zacchaeus to be a cheating swindler because he worked for the wrong administration.

This tense change leaves a more open interpretation possible. For centuries the translations have forced a particular interpretation. The way Luke tells the story another interpretation is possible. If Zacchaeus is telling Jesus what his business practice has always been then we are not meeting a bad tax collector, but an ethical and generous tax collector. If this is the case then the hostility of the good citizens of Jericho is based on prejudice. He works for the wrong company so he can't be worthy of our society.

Luke concludes the story by reminding his readers that the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. Our traditional reading of this story suggests that Zacchaeus' lostness lay in his cheating. Another reading of the story suggests that his lostness may have sat in being ostracised by the prejudice of his community. He could not know the assurance of God's acceptance of him while his society with its religious leaders, its God people, would not convey their acceptance.

This amounts to a brutal rebuke of all who hold prejudices. Luke has Jesus remind them that Zacchaeus is also one of God's elect, a son of Abraham. This alternative reading of the story raises new considerations, the possibility that God's word reaches deeper into our prejudice-ridden society.

We don't need to get too excited about the different possible interpretations of this point raised by the tense of the verbs in Zacchaeus' speech. Was he bad and he had a wonderful conversion or was he good and badly misunderstood? What really matters is what Jesus said about him. Jesus received Zacchaeus into the community of the Kingdom, not because of his conversion nor because he may have been good all along. Jesus announced, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

Zacchaeus may be a tax collector, but it does not stop him coming within God's covenant relationship as a descendent of Abraham. But neither does it stop the tax collector hating community who were lost in their prejudices. The argument that assures Zacchaeus of salvation must hold good for all.

Luke makes a lot of the status of being descendants of Abraham. For him it is a touch stone of being worthy of God's favour. He had Jesus argue that the crippled woman he healed on the Sabbath was a daughter of Abraham and therefore worthy. He had John the Baptist denounce the self-righteous who claimed their descent from Abraham as their right to God's favour when he declared that the stones that surrounded them could be raised up as descendants of Abraham.

This all presents a problem for those of us who are not descendants of Abraham. Thank goodness we have St Paul to argue our case. To the Galatians he points out that God honoured Abraham's faith and that it is by faith that we are saved. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, 'we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith,¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).

There is a consistency in all this. Salvation for Zacchaeus, salvation for the crowd that ostracized him, salvation for the Galatians and the Thessalonians, salvation for us in our prejudice ridden societies belongs to the people of God by the grace of God declared and availed in Jesus.