

“MEETING THE MAIN MAN”

Get Shorty - Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1-10

Last Sunday morning we looked at the encounter Jesus had with a rich man who responded with sadness to Jesus' call to commitment. This week, we are focussing on the story of another rich man, but this time his reaction to Jesus is one of gladness, not sadness. Not long after Jesus had spoken with the rich young ruler, whose story is probably on the same page of your Bible in Luke's Gospel (we read it last week from Mark's Gospel, but it's here in *Luke 18:18ff*), he passed through the city of Jericho. On the outskirts he healed a blind man and then came into the city where he was to encounter Zacchaeus, one of those people whose story is very well-known to many people.

The young man Jesus met shortly before was, we are told, rich – but we don't know how he came to be rich. Zacchaeus was wealthy, Luke tells us, and we do know how he came to have his money. He was a tax collector. In fact, he was a “*chief tax collector*”. The Greek for tax collector is “*telones*”, but Zacchaeus is referred to as “*architelones*” – a word which appears nowhere else in the Bible. From what we can piece together, this man ran a franchise on behalf of the Roman occupying power. It was bad enough working for the enemy, but this man was also taking money off his fellow citizens to give to the enemy.

It worked like this – very much like today's much-vaunted PFI and out-sourcing initiatives. The Romans needed their taxes collected, but they didn't want to do it themselves, so they auctioned off the right to collect them and people like Zacchaeus, the first century equivalent of Serco or Capita or Accenture, would tender for the contract to collect the taxes. Let's say that the Romans wanted 1,000 talents from Jericho. Zacchaeus put in his bid, saying that he'd collect it for them and the Romans were quite happy to let him do it, so long as he came up with the 1,000 talents regularly – but he'd also collect a bit more from the citizens to ensure his profit margins. But it was a busy place, so Zacchaeus then sold the right to collect in each district to, say, ten other people, who paid him a bit extra for the privilege, which he kept as his cut of the profits. They then sold that on to people who might collect in smaller areas, also adding their mark up and the taxpayers then had to pay not only the taxes the Romans wanted but a fair bit of on-costs as well, which went into the pockets of the tax collectors as their reward for doing it all.

Of course, this meant a huge burden on the people who were paying the taxes, but the tax collectors – and Zacchaeus as chief tax-collector – did very well indeed out of it, thank you very much. It was all legal, sanctioned by the state, but the amount the tax-collectors creamed off was not regulated and they could basically take as much as they wanted to cover their initial outlay in paying for the franchise and providing a hefty profit for themselves (much like Serco and friends). Legal, yes, but not really very ethical or fair. And eventually, as a legal historian who specialises in the background to the Bible – A N Sherwin-White – once wrote, eventually, the tax collectors had “*by their greed so damaged state and provincial finances that the emperor had to re-organise the tax system.*” Zacchaeus' greed was legitimised by the state – legal but quite contrary to all the God had said to the Jewish people throughout their history.

The background to this story seemed to me to fit in very well with another quotation I came across this week. “*Some of the worst aspects of human nature are tolerated, indulged – sometimes even incentivised – by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally de-moralised.*” Did anyone else hear David Cameron say that on Monday about the rioters? He could equally have been talking about Zacchaeus. He should equally have been talking about bankers, media tycoons, libel lawyers and others who manage to feed their greed without recourse to breaking windows and burning shops because they can still feed that greed legally. Of course they can – they have the influence, the power, the money to ensure that the laws work in their favour. Legal – but very often unethical and immoral. The rich guys at the top have probably ruined more lives than the rioters, just as Zacchaeus with his state-sponsored extortion had ruined many a poor Jericho trader.

Sadly, you and I benefit from it too. Our shareholdings, our pensions, our incomes – for many of us in a place like Lichfield – are shored up through actions and strategies which are not always in line with the kind of things that God has said in his word. We are, most of us, pretty well off compared with the rest of the world, but we do seem to apply a different set of standards depending on who we're talking about – rioters or bankers, rich or poor, the well-heeled or the dispossessed. I was recently at a meeting where some decisions were being made about distributing some charitable funds and a local businessman responded to an application from a poor family by saying that he wouldn't support it because they were just trying to get as much as they could out of the system. That was from a man who had built his business on getting as much as he could from pretty well everyone he came into contact with – after all, that's what business is basically about. So when we look down on Zacchaeus as something of a baddie, let's recognise that in many people's eyes he would be a hero. Indeed, if his little empire was transferred to the present, I have no doubt some of us would want to buy shares in it.

The people he took his money from didn't necessarily see him as a hero, though. He would have been despised, as we've already said, as a collaborator, a traitor – a con man even. It's often said that he operated on the edges of society, but he would no doubt have had his rich friends and his own circle of similarly compromised citizens who operated rather on the edge of accepted morality. I've never been entirely sure that he had to climb the tree because he was pushed out of the way by people who despised him. It's more likely that he simply got caught behind the crowd and had to compensate for his short stature by finding a better vantage point so that he could see who Jesus was.

And he was simply curious. The way Luke phrases it makes that clear. "*He wanted to see who Jesus was.*" Who is this man? If there were crowds, then obviously something special was happening, someone special was arriving. Maybe word had reached him of the miracle that Jesus had done on the way into the city – the healing of the blind man. Maybe word had come from a bit further afield. Whatever it was, Zacchaeus was so keen to find out more that he took the rather undignified step of climbing up a tree which overhung the street. I suspect that he wouldn't have been the only one up there.

But whether he was alone and easily seen or one of a bunch of people hanging from the branches, Jesus spotted him and addressed him by name. That call to this wealthy little tax collector comes with a sense of necessity. Jesus says, "*I must stay at your house today.*" Something had compelled Zacchaeus to seek out Jesus and something had drawn Jesus to look for him and identify him up in the sycamore branches. There was almost an inevitability about this encounter – and that's something that can encourage us in our evangelism, too. I'm no hypercalvinist (the idea that God will get people he has chosen in the end so there's no need for us to do any real evangelism), but I do believe that God is working away in the background drawing people to him **as a result** of our involvement in his kingdom.

And Jesus spoke, too, with a sense of urgency: "*I must stay at your house today.*" There was no putting off this encounter. Jesus was, as Luke notes at the beginning of this story, "*passing through*" Jericho on the way to his destiny in Jerusalem. He wouldn't be coming this way again, so it was now or never for Zacchaeus. Paul, writing to the Corinthians (2 *Corinthians* 6:2) and the author of the letter to the Hebrews (*Hebrews* 3:12-15) both stress that time is short and you need to take the opportunities to respond to God when they arise. You never know how many more opportunities you'll get to say yes to Jesus.

And Zacchaeus does just that. He came down immediately and "*gladly*" took Jesus along to his house, demonstrating his new found commitment to the way of Jesus by offering to make restitution to those whom he felt he had wronged – and giving his surplus wealth away to charity. He sees that he has too much. Remember, most of his wealth has been gained legally, within the law, as part of a state-sponsored programme. He does say "*If I have cheated anyone ...*" For him the lines are still a bit blurred, but he's willing to do what it takes to get himself back into a life of righteousness as he receives the grace of God offered in Jesus Christ.

But why did he respond so quickly and readily? Obviously we don't know what was going on in his mind, nor what had led up to this encounter, but I reckon – in terms of why Luke includes the story here in his account – that it is to prove the truth of what Jesus said to his disciples after the last encounter with a rich man. Remember that the disciples had said, *“Who then can be saved?”* (Luke 18:26) in response to Jesus' assertion that it was very difficult for rich people to enter God's Kingdom. Jesus replied, *“What is impossible with men is possible with God.”* Well, here's a man who is very rich, who would seem to be a prime example of someone who would find it difficult to get into God's Kingdom, to be saved. As well as the riches, there's the issue of where they came from and, in terms of Jewish law, his handling of foreign money would have made him unclean. But Jesus says explicitly, *“Today salvation has come to this house.”* And it has come because of Zacchaeus's faith in him – he is a *“son of Abraham”*: not just a Jewish person, but a believer in Jesus, as Paul makes clear in *Romans 4*. God's miraculous saving power is at work here – at work for everyone to see. Michael Wilcock, who has written a book about Luke's Gospel, says this:

“When we witness the conversion of a person like [Zacchaeus], there are two things we can hardly deny: its cause must be a power which can work miracles, and its effect will be repercussions in the society in which he lives. In other words, his world will begin to change. But it will only be because his heart has been changed first.”

It's got to start in people's hearts, whatever social, political and legal steps might be taken to try and change things. But when they do, the ripples will move out to bring salvation to those who need it so desperately.

In fact, as Jesus says in conclusion, that is what this is all about – *“the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”* Jesus came to turn people's lives around, to bring conversion and transformation. It's the very heart of his ministry and mission. The stories we have in the Gospels are of people who encountered Jesus and were transformed. The story of the rich young ruler is notable as an exception – but he went off sad because of that. As Jesus told Nicodemus in the garden that night he came to see him, *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world”* – to point the finger and say how terrible it all is and what awful consequences there will be (although that did come into his teaching and preaching) – *“but to save the world through him”* (John 3:17). And here's a glimpse of what that might be like.

So how do we respond? I imagine most of us here this morning would say that we believe in Jesus – we probably wouldn't be here otherwise – but have we really responded as Zacchaeus did? Norval Geldenhuys, another scholar who wrote about this passage, says, *“When Jesus comes into a person's life and gains authority there, selfishness and dishonesty are irresistibly eradicated.”* Jesus, in his grace, came into Zacchaeus's life, into his home. But that wasn't the end of the story. That gracious visit of Jesus, which would have seen him regarded as ceremonially unclean by many Jews, motivated Zacchaeus to **do** something, to give away his excess wealth and seek to restore the damage he'd done. And no doubt that had some pretty powerful repercussions in the community there in Jericho. We may have invited Jesus in, but we're still hanging on to all that other stuff – maybe the kind of thing that Zacchaeus was, or maybe other things that Jesus really wants us to surrender for him. We haven't yet submitted to his authority.

We respond to this story by letting Jesus transform us – our lives, our actions, our attitudes. Once we do that we can start to have an effect on others around us. As Michael Wilcock wrote, there will be repercussions as people see us, totally against the way the world acts, sorting out our greed, acknowledging that making money isn't the chief goal of human beings, giving to those in need where we can, using our excess to alleviate the distress of other. The new can start to be used by him to help the lost, those whose lives have been derailed into false hopes, misplaced expectations, distorted attitudes.

I quoted David Cameron earlier on. He went on to say, *“The question is ... do we have the determination to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations?”* We could say an awful lot about the reasons for that moral collapse that I suspect Mr Cameron would not have had in mind when he said that, but let's just remind ourselves that we are part of

this society and maybe we need to look at the part we have played in it and, more particularly, the way in which we have failed to speak out as we should have done – or how we have failed to live out as we should have done the values and attitudes of the Kingdom of God. But how determined **are** we to play our part with the necessity and urgency that Jesus demonstrated as he approached Zacchaeus? How willing are we to involve ourselves in the mission of Jesus to “*seek and to save what is lost*”? Zacchaeus was willing to give away half of his wealth. Jesus was willing to give up everything for you and me.

Discussion notes on next page

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Questions for discussion

1. To whom might we liken Zacchaeus today? What are the similarities? And what are the differences?
2. What are the differences between Zacchaeus and the Rich Young Ruler? (Look at *Luke 18:18ff.*)
3. What Zacchaeus did was legal but morally suspect? What is the difference between law and morality? How should we respond to similar issues in our own day?
4. Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus with necessity and urgency. How should that influence our evangelism?
5. What does Jesus mean by "*a son of Abraham*"?

6. What is your response to this story?