

Pentecost 23 C
November 4, 2007: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am

Habakkuk 1. 1-4 & 2. 1-4 and Luke 19. 1-10

You probably know, almost too well, this much loved story about Zacchaeus, the man who one day climbed a sycamore tree in order that he might catch a glimpse of Jesus. It is a Sunday School 'special'.

It all happened in Jericho, and it was Jesus' last stop before Palm Sunday. So, whereas we - on this first Sunday in November - are not far from setting our eyes on Christmas, this meeting between Zacchaeus and Jesus is placed just as Jesus starts to set his eyes on Easter - on the Cross. That location in Luke's bigger picture gives an even greater weight to the final words of the passage - "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost".

Jericho must have been a wonderful place. William Barclay writes of it in this way:

Jericho was a very wealthy and very important town. It lay in the Jordan valley and commanded both the approach to Jerusalem and the crossings of the river which gave access to the lands east of the Jordan. It had a great palm forest and world-famous balsam groves which perfumed the air for miles around. People called it 'The City of Palms'. Josephus called it 'a divine region', 'the fattest in Palestine'. The Romans carried its dates and balsam to world-wide trade and fame.

We can add that all this combined to make Jericho, not only the 'fattest' region, but also one of the greatest taxation centres in all of Palestine. Apparently the mining boom in some regions of Australia has seen tax revenue flooding into Commonwealth coffers. Jericho would have been a little like that - a 'boom town' for taxation revenue. And the fact that Zacchaeus is a "chief tax collector" in Jericho (19.2), makes it a sure thing that he was a very wealthy man. His table will have been full, with dates and balsam, and all manner of good things. Zacchaeus was a man who had reached the top.

Sadly for him, Zacchaeus would also have been somewhere near the top of 'the most loathed of people' list. Romans, then the imperial rulers of Palestine, relied on tax collectors, like him, to fund their far-flung empire; and it was a very corrupt system. There will have come a time when Zacchaeus chose wealth over friendship, because it was a universal certainty that to become a tax collector was to become a lonely person indeed. As another commentator, Fred Craddock, writes: That Zacchaeus was a 'chief tax collector' implicates him even more deeply in the corrupt tax system of the Roman government.

So, while these 10 verses in Luke reveal nothing of Zacchaeus' private life, this much we may safely assume: that his life was complicated, probably compromised and corrupted - and he was an outsider. (Isn't it interesting that Jesus reaches

those who are outsiders, whether rich or poor)

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But that is all background now as we look at this outing taken one day by the 'Chief tax collector' of Jericho. Zacchaeus comes out among the crowd for a particular event; a particular man. We are not given any reason, but we may assume that, although his table was full, his life was empty. An abundance of material things, yes; but poverty elsewhere in life. Poverty of relationships, perhaps also poverty of spirit. That may have been why he came out that day to see Jesus.

And added to this, Zacchaeus might have heard of how Jesus ate with another tax collector, named Levi, and had called Levi to become one of his followers (Luke 5.27-32). Perhaps Zacchaeus was curious to know about this Jesus who, unlike almost all other Jews, 'eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners' (Mt 9.11)

Whatever the reason, Zacchaeus was determined to see Jesus - and that is the most interesting thing we know about him. He wanted to see Jesus. It reminds me of the phenomena of the famous Hollywood celebrities who want to meet with the Dalai Lama. They are obscenely well paid, they have everything the world tells us we could possibly want in life. What are they missing? What do they hope to gain from this spiritual man who is going to tell them (we trust) that wealth is nothing compared to inner richness? Perhaps, in fact, they know - deep down - how poor they really are...

When I think of Zacchaeus, I think of a story I was once told.

A young boy once found a \$5 note on the footpath. From that day, he never lifted his head when walking, but always kept his eyes to the ground. In the course of his lifetime he accumulated 516 buttons, 5,170 pens, \$322.55, a bent back and a miserly disposition. He lost the glory of sunlight, the light of the stars, the smile of friends, tree blossoms in spring, the blue sky, and the entire joy of living.

Maybe that is why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Maybe that is why he lifted his head - and climbed a tree.

And you know how the rest of the story goes.

Zacchaeus, hurry and come down! For I must stay at your house today. So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him... Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house'.

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Some scholars think that the offer of Zacchaeus to make good his wrongdoing

dulls the edge of the radical grace of the story because it gives the impression of trying to earn forgiveness, and the earning of forgiveness is a concept very foreign to Jesus' teaching (and should be foreign to the teaching of the church, but is not always). They suggest that verse 8, in which Zacchaeus declares that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and return a four-fold amount to anyone he has defrauded, may be a later addition to the story. But I don't agree. Zacchaeus' offer to give half of his possessions to the poor and a generous restitution to anyone he may have cheated is itself evidence of the radical nature of Christ's grace and the power of the good news that Jesus brought to his table that day. In the Christian faith, grace and repentance are yoked together - there is no question about it. But grace comes first.

The story ends with those wonderful words: The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost (19.10).

We should always be careful how we take the meaning of that word lost. In the New Testament it does not mean damned or doomed. It simply means in the wrong place (Barclay). A thing is lost when it has become out of touch with the place where it belongs. And when we find such a thing we return it to the place it ought to be. Being lost is not only an experience of childhood.

Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost: to restore them - to restore us - to our rightful place. A person is lost when they have wandered away from God, and a person is found when he or she takes their place, once more, where they belong. Thanks be to God that Jesus Christ came to lead the lost back to the place where they (where we belong).