

3rd November 2013 – Sermon for 9am & 10.30am Wesley – Pentecost 24

Theme: “Welcoming even the unlovely, the outcaste”

Reading: Luke 19:1-10 ‘The story of Zacchaeus’

Introduction

Over these past few Sundays we have had some challenging parables about prayer (Luke 18:1-8) with the persistent widow and last Sunday about how to pray or not to pray with the Pharisee and the Tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14). Today we have the familiar account of the testimony of Zacchaeus, the tax-collector, whose life was ‘turned around’ by his encounter with Jesus. Possibly, in the parable of last Sunday, Jesus already had had the encounter described today with Zacchaeus as of course the Gospels were compiled quite a while after Jesus’ death/resurrection. Luke’s dating is around forty plus years after Jesus. Certainly Zacchaeus does what is expected from within the parable of last week showing practical recompense for the grace, mercy and forgiveness received from God through Christ. Let us look at the story.

Story

As you know, I am a fisherman and the teller of ‘tall stories’. However, with the advent of email, digital photos and smart phones my ‘tall stories’ of fishing exploits have become normalised as people say ‘let’s see the pictures, Dave!’ Hence my tall stories have ‘shrunk’ which is a shame. No such luck for Zacchaeus – he continues to become smaller in the telling of this well-known story. Obviously he was short but we don’t know exactly how ‘vertically challenged’ he was.

Jesus is entering Jericho, passing through on his way to Jerusalem and his last few days. Obviously as one ‘shunned by society’ due to his job as the ‘chief tax collector’ people were happy to make sure that Zac couldn’t see over them. Israel had a history of paying taxes to other countries in one way or another. The Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Greeks and now the Romans took more than their fair share over the centuries. Tax collecting had become part of society but everyone hated giving money to a foreign ruler, seeing their money go elsewhere. Hence for generations the tax-collectors had been hated. It was ingrained into society. The tax-collectors put personal gain or personal security ahead of loyalty to their nation, ahead of love for their own people and ahead of respect for the promises of God. Zacchaeus was one of them. Zacchaeus was working for the wrong side and was aiding the enemy to keep his people subjugated. Obviously in the wealthy area of Jericho, on the trade route, Zac had done well but had made few friends.

Hence the indignity of shimmying up a tree to get a look at this man Jesus. Probably not every day that Jesus had people looking at him from a tree and obviously it caught his attention. But his response flawed those around.

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must come to your house today.” (verse 5).

Jesus called the tax collector by name and invited himself over.

The people were not happy.

“All the people saw this and began to mutter. ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’” (verse 7)

In a sense Jesus was going to the home of some-one outside the bounds of good Jewish society. To the home of an outcaste, some-one hated by others for their role in society. Zacchaeus suddenly had to look at himself, if Jesus was coming to his home, into his life. It is at that moment that Zacchaeus accepts to change his ways, give half his possessions to the poor and re-imburse anyone he has defrauded by paying them back 4 times over. That is indeed a change of heart along with a change of financial practices. Very impressive!!

Jesus concluded this encounter with the words:

“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (verses 9/10)

Here we have Jesus saying that even though the Jews exclude the tax collector, God doesn't. Zacchaeus, because of his acceptance of Jesus and his actions, through faith, he is indeed part of God's family. Secondly and importantly, Jesus says that it is his mission to seek and save the likes of Zacchaeus. Very humbling for all of us as we reflect on the reading.

Meaning for us today

What are we meant to take from this account for ourselves today, remembering that this was a story from so long ago.

I believe that there are a number of aspects for us to take to heart.

Firstly, there is the need to accept others, without judgement, and make our own opinion of them rather than what others say to us. We can be so quick to pass judgement that we need to be careful. We can easily be like the crowd who spoke against Jesus for associating with Zacchaeus.

Secondly, we are called to look at the difference our Christian faith makes in our lives. Are we indeed grateful to God for the forgiveness, acceptance, grace and love that has been given to us through Christ? What difference to our lives has it meant being or becoming a Christian? How do we live out that difference? Big questions that flow from this passage!

Thirdly, what are we doing, in the cause of Jesus, to seek and save those who are lost? Not the terminology that is fashionable today.

However, we may use words like, 'How are we living out our faith so that we are witnesses to others?'

Story

Let me conclude with a true story. There was a woman who had a deep Christian faith. She went to church regularly and ran a Bible study as well as a seniors' group in her local congregation. She longed for the day her husband would come to church with her. He was fine with her going to church and would throw out the line, 'Say a prayer for me' which she took personally and did. For more than 30 years he didn't come except for the occasional Christmas or Easter service. Long after I left that parish, I heard he had started coming to church quite regularly. I enquired as to why he had begun going to church and it was a joyful, but tearful two-fold answer. Firstly he had had some major medical issues that made him think about his humanity, his frailty and his faith. Secondly it was about the faith his wife had shown over those many years and she had not wavered. Then one day she said it was as if a switch had been 'turned on', suddenly he said he was coming to church and wanted to learn more for himself. She used the words, it was like the story of Zacchaeus, it was as if he had encountered Jesus and wanted to change his life. It was so dramatic that even his wife struggled with the transformation. That is what an encounter with the risen Christ can do for some people – they are transformed.

I know, because I was even though, on occasions, I slip into my old ways.

Final note

The name Zacchaeus, in the Hebrew, can mean 'clean' or 'innocent' and this is what is declared of him by Jesus: "Today salvation has come to this house.....", because Zacchaeus has changed his ways and has followed the way of Jesus. Praise be to God. Amen