

Sermon Archive 268

Sunday 3 November, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 19: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Before the sermon proper, here's a wee word about how the story of Zacchaeus fits into the larger story. Just a couple of encounters before, in the previous chapter, Jesus had had a conversation with a rich person. Jesus challenged him to sell his possessions and distribute the proceeds to the poor. The rich person refused, and went away, still rich but very sad. He'd failed to do the joyful, generous thing. He'd met the generous One, and remained self-centred.

When the original audience, hearing the Jesus story for the first time, is introduced to this **new** figure, Zacchaeus, another rich person, they're going to think "here we go again - another candidate for a spiritual disaster story". But no; to our surprise, Zacchaeus does the right thing - and he doesn't even need to be prompted to do it. It just comes forth from him, as if spontaneously - like he's a true son of Abraham.

Daniel Clendenin, an American scholar and Bible blogger, makes an interesting observation. He notes that Zacchaeus's phrase "I will give my possessions to the poor" **can** be translated (perhaps **should** be translated) in progressive present tense as "Lord, I always give half of my wealth to the poor, and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy I always make a fourfold restitution."

If that's what Zacchaeus is doing, then he's already doing what the rich young ruler couldn't do. If that's what he's doing, then he's already being a true son of Abraham. His community, for some reason, just can't see it. Maybe they can't see past their resentment of having to pay taxes - rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar's.

We're told what the community sees in the tree. It sees a sinner. What

Jesus sees is a person forced to climb, because his community has blocked him out - pushed him to the back. What Jesus sees is someone he wants to dine with - share food with, get to know.

Indeed; no matter how you translate your Greek verbs, Jesus and the community are seeing different things when they look at Zacchaeus. Who do you think might be right?

We'll think about that some more.

-ooOoo-

I think that Luke, who wrote the story of Zacchaeus, wanted us to be a bit confused about him. In Hebrew, his name, "Zacchaeus", means "righteous". Strangely, though, this righteous person is a tax gatherer - a member of a completely unrighteous profession. So, is he good, or bad? Well, he's rich, and working for the Romans - so probably he's bad. Right from the start of the story, when a pregnant Mary was singing, she sang that the rich would be sent empty away - so probably bad. Also bad is that he has no sense of dignity; in Middle Eastern culture a grown man would never run - yet Zacchaeus runs. In Middle Eastern culture, nor would a grown man climb a tree. Climbing trees was only for little children. Interestingly, the last mention of "little children" by Luke was one chapter earlier when Jesus took some onto his knee and declared that it was to such as them that the kingdom belonged. The word Jesus uses to describe the children, little, is exactly the same word that Luke uses to describe Zacchaeus - little. That's confusing; is there a very subtle hint there that the kingdom might belong to the little creature forced up that tree? Is he bad, or is he good? Does he belong, or does he not? Is he just some confusing walking contradiction? He's certainly an embarrassment in Jericho. I'd prefer that he was easier to work out. Then we could work out what to do with him . . . respond correctly . . . invite him in, or lock him out.

Members of his own community don't seem to have had too much trouble working him out. He's a fact of their life - but they don't need to give him a place. They demonstrate their lack of regard for him by the way they keep him at the back of the crowd - with his view obscured! If

you were operating out of respect, or concern, or the logistics of practical decency, you'd bring the short ones to the front of the crowd, wouldn't you? Short ones at the front can see; tall ones at the back can see over the top; everyone can see. Putting the short ones at the back, where they **cannot** see, is a real body language statement. When, at the back, all you can see is the backs of everyone else - you know how you're being treated. Interestingly, that treatment is exactly why today he's lost his dignity by having to climb a tree. His community's attitude to him, their pushing him to the back of the crowd, has contributed to his looking stupid. God, has he no shame? Well, no he doesn't - and those around him have had a hand in making it so. Ostracism, social blocking, has chipped in to the poor functioning of this human being in this society. Lock 'em up; throw away the key; see how they grow - or more likely, demean themselves! He ends up, a strange fruit, hanging in a sycamore tree, because his community has judged him "bad". I wish I could work him out . . . so that I can treat him correctly. How to work him out!

Perhaps I should call him to come down from the tree, so we can talk. But if I call him down from the tree, he might get all allegorical over it. He might interpret me as saying to him "come away from what is demeaning you", "come away from that community imposed position that's making you a figure of fun". He might end up thinking that, as one person takes him seriously, God is speaking. I wouldn't want to do that, in case he's bad, and gets unwarranted affirmation when he doesn't deserve it. So maybe I won't tell him to come down from his embarrassing tree. Maybe I'll leave that for a more foolish (or forgiving person) to say. Jesus, shush, don't say it! You're going to say it, aren't you? If you say it, I'll grumble - and so will the people around me. He's a sinner . . . isn't he? I wish I could work him out!

Maybe Luke knows we're going to find Zacchaeus hard to figure out. So he writes a tiny little clue into the story - the unusual use of a slightly odd expression - maybe revealing something of his inner life. The regular way of describing someone trying to see someone going past

would be “He was trying to see Jesus”. Luke writes that Zacchaeus was “trying to see who Jesus was”. Not seeing Jesus, but trying to see who Jesus is. The community certainly has seen who Zacchaeus is. They know exactly; he’s a sinner. But Zacchaeus is not so sure about Jesus - he’s trying to work out who he is. The Pharisees know who Jesus is; he’s a sinner also. A different kind of sinner from Zacchaeus, but a sinner nevertheless - breaking the Sabbath; forgiving people, when it’s God’s job alone to forgive; arguing with the religious authorities; they’re clear about who Jesus is. Zacchaeus is still working it out. He wants to look closer. He wants to engage. He wants to seek the Son of Man, who also is on his own quest to seek the other - work us out. Will the seeker meet the seeker? What will come from it? “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down from there - for I would meet you - I would stay at your house”. Don’t say it Jesus! Someone who’s feeling lost might just then come to life - and give away his money, and bless the poor - and reveal to us we’ve been quite wrong about who he is. And then we’d grumble, O we’d grumble. He’s a sinner . . . isn’t he? Not a child of Abraham! Not one of those little and lost ones to whom you said the kingdom belongs! Let’s just leave him up the tree - a scorned and cornered sinner; it’s easier if we leave it that way. Don’t say it Jesus! We’ll leave it that way.

-ooOoo-

If Jesus had a body, living, breathing in our world today, what do you think it would be doing? If it were to find a creature caught in a tree, harbouring questions, trying to work things out, what would it say? Would it make clear declarations about sin, and good and bad? Would it judge until all the dignity was gone?

Or, would it see what we have failed to see? Would it seek and save - revealing from the mess around it a real child of Abraham? I think that’s what it would do. “Today salvation has come to this house”. Christ is present; he speaks; Zacchaeus comes to life; the right thing is done - and we keep a moment of quiet.

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