

30th October 2022
Habakkuk 1.1-4, 2.1-4
Luke 19.1-10



A heart orientated to neighbour

Minister: Gracious God
**All: May your Living Word come to us
 afresh this morning**

Minister: So touch, we pray our minds and hearts
 with your grace and truth
**All: Through Christ our Lord
 and in the power of your Spirit. Amen**

After the financial volatility of the markets this autumn perhaps it's a little unwise to talk of taxes. However, in the Upside-Down Kingdom of God that's what today's lectionary gospel is about. A tax-collector who downsizes his ill-gotten wealth by re-imbursing the poor and then making a gift in their favour on top.

So, here's this morning's puzzle: Is Zacchaeus really the bad guy in today's story? One of 'those' – that we place beyond the pale, someone in whom all our 'shadows' live, or is he, in fact, a misunderstood good guy?

Jesus is slowly making his last journey to Jerusalem and it's a precious time, as each encounter in the villages through which he passes provides a teaching opportunity. I suspect that those travelling with him learnt new things everyday, and that was surely his plan. So that, once in Jerusalem, they would better understand the Saviour he'd come to be.

Jericho, that city around whose walls the Israelites had walked blowing their trumpets so many years before was a place full of opportunities for bureaucrats like Zacchaeus. This was a trading post city, strategically placed between east and west. A place where taxes were due giving opportunities even for Israelites to switch sides and progress in a career working for the Imperial Roman Inland Revenue. It could make you rich, but it also made you an outcast. You became despised and vilified by those who might once have been your friends. In so many ways Zacchaeus was now lost.

I think we all know what that feels like.

We once got frighteningly lost in France one evening with our young children. Having parked the car so carefully in a nature reserve we had a great time

walking and looking at the plants and animals. Come dusk we simply couldn't make out our way back. We kept smiling, but inside we'd become anxious, confused and slowly running out of options. Eventually we came to a village and one of the shop keepers, having heard that a taxi firm in Nice were refusing to come and pick us up, said she'd be our taxi back to the campsite. People in England, she said, had been kind to her on a recent trip, now she would be kind to us. Well, it was a wonderfully personal expression of the *Entente Cordiale* and it felt reassuring and restorative to be found after being lost.

And that is one of the really big statements Jesus makes here in Luke 19, that he had come to *seek and to save the lost*. People who were all at sea spiritually or emotionally. Folk who felt they'd taken wrong turnings in life and now had nowhere to go.

It's a wonderful definition of salvation, being somehow 'found' by God and set upon a new path and given fresh hope. Zacchaeus seems to have found such a new beginning in today's story. Indeed, some commentators point out that just as Jesus came alongside Levi, another tax collector in Luke 5, so here in Luke 19 he does the same with Zacchaeus. The story seems to be repeated with a mere gap of 14 chapters in between.

We are so used to defining the marginalised as the poor we sometimes fail to see that even the rich can live in despair. Zacchaeus, perhaps like many in his profession in those days, was unloved and shunned. He climbs, as we sang in Sunday School, into a Sycamore Tree for the Saviour he wanted to see.

We are told he was a small man, actually in Greek that could also be translated as a young man. Short or young, he was still someone with considerable authority in society so it's a little odd, even desperate that he climbs a tree. Maybe no one gave him room and he became unwelcome in the crowd. Whatever the reason it gives us a poignant twist in the story. Because he was in a tree, Jesus looked up at him. Isn't that ironic. This 'looked down upon' man so despised by his fellow citizens in Jericho finds himself being 'looked up to' by Jesus. Maybe at that moment as he unexpectedly catches Jesus' gaze, some element of self-worth started to seep back into his life, especially when this travelling rabbi invited himself back to Zacchaeus' house for tea.

And the traditional interpretation, which may indeed be the right one, goes like this. In a conversation we are not party to, Zacchaeus is changed. This man who was lost finds his way home. He begins to see again what he must have been taught in Synagogue school, but had forgotten, that true righteousness is all about having a heart orientated towards one's neighbour. Zacchaeus is surely the story upon which Dickens partially bases the character of Ebenezer Scrooge.

His heart thaws and his wallet opens. He now supports, rather than defrauds, his community, and although the story is, for us, cut short, we'd love to believe that Zacchaeus becomes a beloved and respected neighbour in Jericho.

Our reading from Habakkuk this morning laments the presence of injustice in our world and

asks the age-old question of 'why' God, or at least goodness, so often seems absent. Why is life so unfair? Why is it determined by a birthplace lottery?

The story and exemplar of Zacchaeus is a response. That justice can flow down when our hearts change. When the rich have a care for the poor. When those of us in the Developed World hear the cries of our sisters and brothers in the Developing one.

Salvation comes not just in personal piety but in practical, down to earth compassion expressed through the actions of families, churches and nations.

So that is maybe what some of us learnt in Sunday School. In Jericho, En route to Jerusalem a classic conversion takes place when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus of Nazareth and his life is turned upside down, changed forever as generosity now replaces greed.

But here's the thing, there is just a possibility that we've been reading the narrative the wrong way round.

In many of these gospel encounters three parties and dynamics are often present. There's Jesus, and then the one with whom he meets and talks, and standing alongside, there is frequently an inquisitive and critical group of onlookers; appalled, say, to learn that once again Jesus has gone to eat with Tax Collectors and Sinners. These are the *Chattering Classes* always ready with an opinion, never mind the facts.

And, in a way, this morning, up to this point in the sermon we have been looking at this story through their eyes. We have been critical of Zacchaeus.

Yet, as one commentator from New Zealand has pointed out, the text may challenge this assumption. For the text, in the Greek, doesn't report Zacchaeus as saying *I will give half my possessions to charity and if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay them back fourfold.*

Instead, it uses the present tense: *I give my money to the poor and if I take too much I pay them back four times over.*

Translated this way it's a statement not about how Zacchaeus intends to live, but rather one about how the way he already does.

Now, if that is the case, just maybe this isn't a story about a bad tax collector come good, but about the ill-informed and prejudicial group-think of an overly judgmental crowd, one that lumps Zacchaeus into a stereo-type without really seeing and appreciating the man he already is. And maybe this is why Jesus honoured him by spending time at his house and declaring so publicly that Zacchaeus too was *a son of Abraham.*

In this reading it is the crowd, rather than the tax-collector, which is lost. As it so often is, when peer pressure or society trends, make us act like lemmings as we talk about *young people, prisoners, immigrants or people of other faiths* simply as bad collective nouns, never as individuals and always as being 'other'. It's about us projecting our own 'shadows' onto an anonymous group, lumping everyone together and viewing them as 'not one of us', classifying them as outsiders.

If righteousness is about having a heart orientated towards one's neighbour, and if a core principle of faith is that of striving to create communities of inclusivity where there's a sense of welcome and belonging, then such principles work well with either of today's interpretations.

If Zacchaeus treated the crowd badly, then he needed to make amends. Justice called for a redistribution of his wealth. Salvation and money were intertwined and a teatime conversation with Jesus made all the difference. He now saw his community differently and offered practical and down to earth reconciliation. His heart was now orientated to his neighbours.

And if the crowd had been quick to judgement and consigned Zacchaeus to an unjust stereo type he didn't deserve. If they had been lazy, quick with labels but slow with truth, then they needed to hear Jesus's commendation that Zacchaeus too was a son of Abraham as they woke up to the fact that here was a generous man who lived life with such integrity that when he found out he'd made a mistake and overcharged, he usually paid back four times over because he had a conscience. The challenge of this story then becomes that of the crowd re-orientating their hearts to Zacchaeus and treating him like an honoured neighbour.

I want to finish with part a prayer, offered to us by the Church of Scotland, specifically reflecting on this week's readings, it goes like this:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son:

*Look with compassion on the whole human family;
take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts;
break down the walls that separate us and unite us in bonds of love.*

May that be our prayer as we seek to have a heart, orientated towards our neighbour. Amen