

Jane McBride

Luke 19:1-10

We continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke, the social Gospel where Jesus spends a lot of time crossing boundaries, reaching out to those who have been excluded. The story of Zacchaeus is unique to Luke and I have had an interesting time researching his story for this sermon - how many of us remember him from Sunday school as the 'very little man' of the song we used to sing? Am I showing my age there? Perhaps that story is such a popular one for children's church because children identify with Z since they too often find themselves at the back of a crowd, not being able to see what is going on.

My research has revealed to me that there are two ways to interpret this story - one where we rehabilitate Zacchaeus and his bad reputation right from the start (i.e. he was never corrupt), and one where we see him changed and saved as a result of his encounter with Jesus. Both interpretations can be backed up by the text. The second one, in particular, fits very neatly with Luke's overarching agenda, illustrating in particular 2 of Luke's big issues which the sermons you have heard in past weeks on Luke's Gospel will have picked up on:

- 1) The problem of riches and what to do about them.
- 2) Jesus and his annoying habit of wanting to associate with those that society considers to be sinners.

Earlier in Luke there is the story of a young man who asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him that he needs to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor and he emphasises how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And here we have another rich man, a chief tax collector, belonging to one of those professions which got you ostracised in Jewish society, which got you called a 'sinner' or 'unclean' - the two were very closely linked.

(It is worth noting here perhaps that some people were labelled sinners/unclean merely because of the jobs they did - undertakers because they worked with the dead - it's not necessarily your fault that you get labelled a sinner - it is society judging you?)

So was Zacchaeus a sinner because he was a nasty man who had stolen people's money and defrauded them and become rich at their expense? Or was he merely judged to be a sinner by those around him because of the job he did?

Here is where going back to the source text becomes important and interesting - when Z says to Jesus 'half of my possessions I will give to the poor' - the Greek has this in the present tense - so it could be translated by - 'I regularly give half of my possessions to the poor and if I defraud anyone of anything then I pay back four times as much'. This could be Zacchaeus telling Jesus about his characteristic behaviour, defending his reputation and, in this interpretation, it is still a story of restoration but, Jesus is restoring Z to his community who have ostracised him merely for exercising his vocation.

The other and more popular explanation is that Z is richer than his neighbours because he has used his sometimes ill-gotten gains to line his own pockets. But even in this interpretation, he is not all bad because, when Jesus passes through his town, he is inquisitive enough to try and catch a glimpse of him, however embarrassing it might be for a grown man to climb a tree.

We might want to ask ourselves, having listened to Zacchaeus' story, who are the people in our lives that we would be tempted to leave on the margins, on the outskirts, who might be eager for a glimpse of Jesus but whom we keep at arms' length? Are there people we would be reluctant to welcome to our church or to our homes, people who make us uncomfortable because of who they are or what they do, and yet who, like Z, might surprise us by the lengths to which they are willing to go to catch a glimpse of, to encounter Jesus.

Zacchaeus is not a very popular name today, and yet, why not, it means 'clean'. Whether we choose to believe that Z was always clean but this had to be pointed out to his community by Jesus, or whether we believe that he started off dirty, corrupt, and dishonest and was restored to 'being clean' by his encounter with Jesus - the ending of the story gives us a clean Zacchaeus, a house where salvation dwells.

A few years ago, the Queen of England celebrated a Jubilee. She travelled to many parts of her realm and thousands of people turned out to see her. If security had allowed it, they would certainly have climbed trees, lamp posts, railings to try and catch a glimpse of her driving by. This is one of Jesus' last stopping points on his way to Jerusalem and, by this stage, he has accumulated a huge crowd of followers. Unlike the queen, catching a glimpse of a gloved hand waving is not what marks the passing of the Son of Man. He is actively seeking the lost, those in need of love and restoration. He stops, he sees Zacchaeus high up in his tree, he calls him by name, calls him 'clean', refuses to judge him - Jesus looks for us, calls us by name, and then he follows us home. Amen.