

Scripture for Sunday November 3rd 2019

Psalm 32:1-7 (NIV)

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven; whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. ³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. ⁶ Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

SERMON: Seeking and Saving

The story of the ‘wee’ man called Zacchaeus is one of those Sunday School favourites!¹ It is a dramatic and inspiring story of transformation. Often the story’s familiarity can result in us ignoring the depth in its message, which ultimately is about *Jesus*, not Zacchaeus.² Luke places this story just prior to Christ’s entry into Jerusalem that we celebrate on Palm Sunday. It follows on from two other personal encounters with Jesus in the previous chapter.³ By way of introduction, let us briefly consider those incidents.

In the first, Jesus tells the rich young - and pious - official, who claimed to have kept all the commandments since he was a boy, to “sell everything he has and give it to the poor and then to follow him.” The young official, realising that he has made an idol of his wealth, leaves a sad man.⁴ What we value most in this life reveals what our heart is really like. Jesus then says, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.”⁵ Some then asked, “Then *who* can be saved?”⁶ That’s because wealth obtained by honest means was widely regarded as a sign of God’s *blessing*,⁷ which – if you think about it - sends a terrible message to those who are poor! Jesus turns that view upside down. So, “Who can become right with God?” Jesus replies, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”⁸ The second incident occurs as Jesus is approaching Jericho, where he encounters a blind man begging on the side of the road.⁹ He wants to meet Jesus and the crowds want him to be quiet; so he shouts even louder! Jesus stops and pays attention to this social outcast, converses with him, and heals him. Wholeness, restoration, and joy are all signs of the presence of God’s kingdom.

It is just after those incidents that Luke tells today’s story of Zacchaeus, another social outcast, this time because of his occupation; he was a tax collector. I talked about them last week; let me quickly remind you about them again. Once a nation had been conquered, they had to pay taxes to the victor, in the case, to the Romans, and given the extent of their Empire, they were raking in the money by this time. All sorts of things were taxed: farm land, townships, imports, exports, inheritance, the emancipation and selling of slaves, etc. And they all went to various sources: to the military and their

¹ Luke 19:1-10; only Luke relates this story. (Jericho was a wealthy and important town, a center of taxation for the region.)

² The punchline is Luke 19:10: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

³ Luke 18:18-30; 18:35-43, and these events follow the parable of the pharisee and the tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14). See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/A-Humble-Heart.pdf>

⁴ Luke 18:18-23. See also Mark 10:17-27; Matt 19:16-22. The rich man asks, “What he must do to inherit eternal life (or the kingdom of God)?” Luke’s *readers* already understand that we are to come as a child, having *humility* (18:14-17). See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>

⁵ Luke 18:24. See also Luke 12:16-21; Luke generally has harsh things to say to the rich, see also Luke 6:24-26; 16:19-31.

⁶ Luke 18:26.

⁷ As in the Old Testament story of Job. The New Testament does *not* link prosperity with divine blessing or as a reward for right living.

⁸ Luke 18:27.

⁹ Luke 18:35-43; see also Mark 10:46-52, where the man is named Bartimaeus.

pension fund, to support local law enforcement, building programs, and to the general maintenance of the Empire. For collecting some of these taxes there was a system of tax “sub-letting”, so to speak, whereby the government auctioned off tax contracts to wealthy men who would pay the Romans out of their own pockets, and who would then collect from the public in order to recover their investment. These tax collectors were notorious for being greedy and corrupt, and for making a profit by collecting much more than they spent on their contracts. They were also despised by the Jews for their complicity with the enemy – the Romans. Tax collectors may have been rich, but they were regarded as “sinners” and their (ill-gotten) wealth was *not* interpreted as a sign God’s blessing!¹⁰

Luke, describes Zacchaeus¹¹ as a *chief* tax collector, a term not commonly used and which implicates him more deeply in the corrupt tax system of the Roman government. The higher you are, the greater one’s complicity in the system. We don’t know anything about the private life of Zacchaeus,¹² but we know this much; on principle, no one can be privately righteous while participating and profiting from a program that abuses and crushes people. However, Jesus doesn’t say that Zacchaeus is irredeemable, but given Luke’s gospel has a lot of harsh words for the rich, we might not expect this story to have a happy ending!

What we *do* know is that Zacchaeus was determined to see Jesus. It’s quite likely that Zacchaeus had heard of Jesus’ reputation of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”¹³ Not only was he disadvantaged by being short, but the crowd would have been more than happy to impede his progress and elbow him out of the way! He, nevertheless, overcame the risk of ridicule and embarrassment by running ahead and climbing a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus.¹⁴ Children can identify with Zacchaeus because they’re often not tall enough to see what’s going on. And many adults too can identify with him too because they might like to get closer to Jesus but find it embarrassing to do so. Be encouraged by what happened next. Luke writes, “When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house *today*.”¹⁵” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.”¹⁶ Jesus *seeks out* Zacchaeus! We might think that inviting ourselves into someone’s home is taking a bit of a liberty, but Zacchaeus would have been *thrilled*. Jesus conferred a special honour on Zacchaeus by offering to receive hospitality from him and in the process gave him dignity in the community where he was hated.¹⁷ This is another example of raising up the humble, which we talked about last week.¹⁸ The people who witnessed this began to grumble, “He has

¹⁰ In Luke, tax collectors’ function as prototype outcasts whom Jesus befriends; they are the *moral* equivalent of lepers.

¹¹ Zacchaeus is the Greek form of the Jewish name which derives from the Hebrew meaning “righteous one,” most ironic - given his occupation!

¹² Being an outcast probably meant that he was lonely - and perhaps unhappy and wanting to “belong.”

¹³ Luke 7:34. See also Luke 5:27–32.

¹⁴ A sycamore tree was a large evergreen tree with large, low-lying branches (and a short trunk) that would have been ideal for the Zacchaeus’ purpose. (It produced inferior type of fig that was consumed by the poor.)

¹⁵ Luke uses the word “today” 11 times in his gospel; *twice* in this story: Luke 19:5,9. This brings a sense of immediacy.

¹⁶ Luke 19:5-6.

¹⁷ Since Zacchaeus (and his home) would have been considered “unclean,” Jesus was also crossing the barrier of ritual purity.

¹⁸ Luke 18:14; 14:11. See also [3].

gone to be the guest of a sinner.”¹⁹ In their minds, Jesus was relaxing in the company of the wrong sort of people.

What happens next? Something truly profound happens; he spontaneously undertakes a radical redirection of his entire life. He says, “Lord! Here and now I give half²⁰ of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back *four times* the amount.”²¹ According to Jewish law, *voluntary* restitution called for repayment of the original amount +20%.²² *Compulsory* restitution generally called for *doubling* the original amount.²³ Zacchaeus’ generosity is not, I contend, trying to give the impression that he was willing to earn or buy his forgiveness.²⁴ Rather, his lavishness is an outward sign of his *response* to the grace that he has experienced. He is displaying the fruit of repentance. Zacchaeus, regionally known as a “sinner,” evidently had a fundamental change in character and his actions show his changed heart. Zacchaeus becomes a *true* son of Abraham, a part of God’s family.²⁵

Luke’s punch line to this story, however, is the concluding statement of Jesus: “The Son of Man came to *seek* and to *save* the lost.” This points to Christ fulfilling the words of the prophet Ezekiel, “I (the LORD) will search for the lost and bring back the strays.”²⁶ This, then, is both *who* Jesus is and his divine *mission*. Luke’s Jesus is both *proactive* in seeking and has the *capability* of saving. And note that “saving the lost” does *not* mean “rescuing lost ‘souls’ for heaven.” No, like in the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and the lost son in Luke 15, being “lost” simply means being in the wrong place and needing to be found and restored to one’s proper place within the family of the Father. Recall what the people asked when the rich young official went away sad: “Can rich people be saved?” Jesus says: “What is impossible for humans is possible for God.”²⁷ This surprising, joyful story of Zacchaeus is one such example.

I have a few further comments and observations to add today.

First, have we, like the crowd who thought they knew the heart of God, lost *our* sense of empathy or compassion and are therefore known as those who judge people? Or do we, inadvertently perhaps, create obstacles or barriers that hinder people from “seeing” Jesus? I hope not; but I have to be honest

¹⁹ Luke 18:7, see also Luke 15:2.

²⁰ Giving (only) 50% is *not* questioned by Jesus, i.e., it is a non-issue in light of Luke 18:22 (see also Luke 3:10–14).

²¹ Luke 19:8 (NIV) There some debate over verb tense here in that is the restitution something he *will* do (NRSV) or something he is *currently* doing (Greek literally: “I am giving”).

²² Lev 6:5, Num 5:7. Note, Jesus does not demand this restitution; Zacchaeus does this on his own initiative.

²³ See Exod 22:1,3–4,7; 2 Sam 12:6.

²⁴ Although this view is possible if one reads the narrative in isolation from the rest of Luke’s gospel.

²⁵ Luke 19:9. Recall that Abraham was declared by God as ‘right with God’ because of Abraham’s active faith. Jesus puts Zacchaeus in that same honourable category. This is a genuine conversion. (See also Luke 13:16; Gal 3: 29). Note too when Jesus says “Today salvation has come to this household,” that “salvation” can also be translated “wholeness/healing.”

²⁶ Ezek 34:16. Luke uses this statement to point to Christ’s *identity* (and summarise his mission).

²⁷ Luke 18:26-27.

say “yes, at times I am guilty.” Thankfully Jesus is more radical and does the unexpected – much to the shock of the crowd, and he wants us to follow his example in bringing down the walls of division.²⁸

Second, Jesus *does transform* people: Zacchaeus saw the world differently for having been with Jesus. This encounter led to a changed life that was *evidenced* by his actions. Obviously, he wasn’t perfect thereafter, neither are we as individuals - or collectively as the Church, but by God’s grace we *are* forgiven people and, like Zacchaeus, we have a new *identity* as part of the *family* of God – that’s an exciting thought! Nevertheless, this dramatic story makes us think about the *nature* of “conversion,” because these “road to Damascus”²⁹ experiences can all seem too good to be true! It gives the impression that “sainthood” is instantaneous – and it isn’t. Zacchaeus may have had a U-turn in his life’s direction, but the journey of character change is still a *process*; ask his wife! Such change does not deny our personalities or quirks; it doesn’t change introverts into extroverts, and becoming more Christ-like doesn’t mean Christians all become uniform! That would be sickly boring and, evidently, God loves a diverse family! Some people can remember a date and time when they became a Christian, for others this was a gradual process; both are perfectly valid. What is more important is what has happened since we became consciously aware that we have become followers of Jesus Christ, however long ago that was. Put a different way, if we were to be indicted for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? So, as we look back over the years, how have our *attitudes* and *actions* been shaped by knowing Jesus? In what *ways* has your life - and my life - become more wholesome? Would our nearest and dearest agree with our assessment? Are we *more* loving, more joyful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled³⁰ than a few years ago? These are the signs of God’s transformation and of his Spirit’s presence in our lives. It is, therefore, appropriate from time to time to pause and reflect, “How have I been transformed by knowing Jesus?” I encourage you to think about that today.

Finally, remember that while Zacchaeus was curious and wanted to see Jesus, *Jesus* took the initiative and sought him out and gave him far more than he expected. God is like that, both in reaching out to us and surprising us with his presence and embrace. Jesus *still* seeks out people today and invites himself into our lives; but he will only enter *if we let* him in. Don’t be like the rich young official and walked away sad, instead be like Zacchaeus and experience his joy at being welcomed into God’s family. If Jesus sought someone as morally bankrupt as Zacchaeus, then *no one* is excluded. For those who have lost their way in life, this is good news. As I indicated earlier, this is not a magic wand, but it does begin a journey in a new direction as we follow the Jesus-way with the help of his Spirit. Since Jesus still seeks today, may we respond appropriately, and may we also hear in our heads and hearts Christ’s affirmation, “Today salvation has come to this household.”³¹ Amen; let us pray.

²⁸ This “bringing down the walls of division” is a key theme in Jean Vanier’s *Life’s Great Questions* – our current Book Study.

²⁹ See Acts 9:1-31.

³⁰ These are the “fruit of the Spirit”; Gal 5:22-23.

³¹ Luke 19:9.