

“Real Change”

27 March 2022 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: How Deep the Father's Love

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Sermon:

This is such a well-known story! It's a favourite of Sunday School teachers, probably because every child can identify with this little man who climbs trees. He's a bit of a figure of fun because that picture of him running after Jesus, jumping up and down trying to see over the heads of the crowd until he finally hits on the idea of climbing a tree, really sticks in your mind. However I think that there are a lot of things about this story that we should take seriously because I think that there are a lot of Zacchaeus in our society too. But before we get into that let's have a closer look at the story.

As our story opens, Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. On the way he passes through Jericho, an important trading centre. By now Jesus is quite the celebrity, with a large following. He had just healed a blind man at the side of the road somewhere outside the city and the news of that would have spread like wildfire, drawing even more people eager for a glimpse of this miracle worker. That creates a problem for Zacchaeus because there are so many people that he can't see a thing. Anybody who is vertically challenged suffers when they are in a big crowd. They can't see because most people are taller than they are, unless they can push their way to the front, to get an unobstructed view.

Unfortunately for Zacchaeus a lack of height is not his only problem in his attempt to see Jesus. As well as being short, Zacchaeus was also a tax collector, and very rich. In our reading he is described as a “chief tax collector” which makes us think of a manager in the Revenue Service. In fact the way it seems to have worked in the Roman Empire was that, rather than the Romans doing the tax collecting themselves, local entrepreneurs would bid for the business and then pay the full amount themselves. They were then given the authority to collect the taxes themselves, along with a little extra to make it worth their while. So somebody like Zacchaeus would then repeat the process with those lower down the food chain, who would come up with smaller amounts, and, eventually, the hired muscle, presumably backed up by imperial troops, would extract the amount required from the locals. As you can imagine, this system was fraught with opportunities for corruption and very oppressive behaviour – especially because the tax had already been paid by the tax collectors themselves, so they had every incentive to extract the most money possible from those at the bottom of the pile.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, the money was to go to support the hated Roman occupation. So tax collectors were collaborators who were taking the opportunity presented by the foreign occupation to make huge profits at the expense of their fellow countrymen.

Understandably, they were not a popular section of the community.

So although Zacchaeus is rich and successful in worldly terms, he is as much on the fringes of society as the blind beggar that Jesus healed outside Jericho. And just like the blind beggar, Zacchaeus wanted something from Jesus. He might not have understood exactly what that was, but it was important to him that he got to see this man who could do miracles. It was so important to him, that he completely forgets himself. The crowd was certainly not going to let him through, and he may have been worried about someone taking the opportunity to stick a knife in his ribs if he tried to push through. So, in his eagerness to see Jesus he runs ahead and climbs a tree.

Now it doesn't sound like that big a deal to us, but in those days an older man wouldn't have run anywhere because, in order to run, they would have to hitch up their robes, exposing their legs to public view, losing any shred of dignity they had. And if running was undignified, climbing a tree was even worse. They weren't big on underwear back then, so climbing a tree left nothing to the imagination of anyone passing by beneath you. You could kiss your dignity goodbye forever.

You can imagine the stares of the crowd as Zacchaeus disappeared up into the branches. They must have wondered what he was playing at! They were probably all in fits of laughter at seeing this important wealthy man shinning up the tree, exposing himself to the ridicule of all and sundry (pun intended.) Then imagine their consternation, their total disbelief, when Jesus, the famous preacher and miracle-worker, stops under the tree to speak to Zacchaeus. That disbelief and bewilderment quickly turns to anger when they hear what Jesus has to say to him. They probably expected that Zacchaeus would receive some sort of condemnation from Jesus, but instead Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

What? Seriously? Jesus is inviting himself to stay with this collaborator? This pathetic fool of a man who hides up a tree because he can't associate with decent people. Why would Jesus want anything to do with this despicable traitor. How can this be?

What we need to understand here is, to share a meal with someone in that culture was a sign of acceptance. So for Jesus, a celebrity preacher and holy man, to invite himself to Zacchaeus's house was to give Zacchaeus an honour that the crowd were certain he did not deserve. What is going on here? This is so far beyond offensive that they don't know what to make of it. Once again, Jesus' shock decision to befriend a notorious sinner rubs the religious people up the wrong way.

In contrast to that, Zacchaeus's reaction is at the other end of the spectrum. He is delighted with himself. V6 tells us 'that he came down at once and welcomed him gladly' but that doesn't convey the full meaning of the Greek text. In the Greek it says he came down rejoicing. He's not just glad, he's blown away! Jesus has not only singled him out to speak to him, he has bestowed on him this incredible honour of wanting to spend the day with **him**, the outcast, the lowest of the low, the one no right-thinking person wants anything to do with.

What makes this passage so interesting is that in Luke's gospel, the rich are not favoured by God. Jesus is a lot keener on the poor, the crippled, the outcast. In the previous chapter we have the story of the rich young ruler? He cannot bring himself to give up his wealth in order to follow Jesus and goes away sad. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

The disciples ask Jesus, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replies, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." And here we see the proof of that statement. This wealthy, corrupt, collaborator, surely someone with no hope of a right relationship with God, is accepted by Jesus, and responds in repentance and saving faith. We see this when Zacchaeus stands up and says, "Look, Lord! Here and now I will 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." Unlike the rich young ruler, Zacchaeus is grabbing the opportunity to turn his life around with both hands. What he is intending to do is what's known as restorative justice. We don't know what was discussed when he spent the day with Jesus, but it is very clear that it transformed his life.

No doubt Jesus explained the whole arc of salvation history to him, and how his arrival ushers in the Kingdom of God. He would have explained to Zacchaeus that following him means participating in God's mission to put all things back to rights and **Zacchaeus gets it**. He really gets it. He begins by proving his genuine repentance by wanting to put things right with his community, hence his enthusiastic embrace of restorative justice.

Now, what I want you to note here, is that this is the **result** of his encounter with Jesus, **not** the pre-condition. He did not have to get his life sorted out before Jesus would come to his home: rather, it was **because** Jesus was already there that made this astonishing turnaround possible. In other words, Zacchaeus belonged before he believed. Jesus invites us to come, just as we are. We don't need to clean up our act before we come, because, quite simply, we can't. We can't change ourselves, it is only the Holy Spirit who has the power to change us, and that happens **after** we come to Jesus. Zacchaeus changes his life as a response to this new relationship with Jesus.

"Today," Jesus says, "salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." Zacchaeus's overwhelming desire to put things right with those he has wronged, demonstrates that he has indeed joined the people of God. His newfound faith confirms him as a son of Abraham, the father of faith. We too, when we come to Jesus become sons and daughters of Abraham by adoption, we become part of the family of God.

Finally, Jesus declares his purpose in all of this: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." He is placing himself squarely in God's redemptive purposes, and as the fulfilment of prophecy. Not just an itinerant preacher, miracle worker and healer, he is the one spoken of in Ezekiel 34:16, in which the Lord declares that he will shepherd his people, "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays." This is God's redemptive purposes in action: the reign of God breaking through.

So what significance does this story hold for us, here in Dublin in 2022? We live in a post-Christian society where a visiting preacher would struggle to attract any sort of a crowd, never mind create the kind of buzz that seems to accompany Jesus everywhere he went. However, I think that there are probably many people like Zacchaeus who realize that there is something important missing in their lives. Zacchaeus knows that there is something that he needs, something more important than his dignity – and that it has something to do with Jesus.

You might be as rich as Zacchaeus – a lawyer, doctor, businessman – with all the success and money in the world. But yet you are haunted by the suspicion that, although it's nice to have money – you like driving your Mercedes and last night's tasting menu at Patrick Guilbaud was soooo good. But you can't shake the feeling that there is something missing. You don't get the same buzz from those pleasures anymore and like the teacher in Ecclesiastes, life just seems a bit meaningless.

Or maybe you're not so rich. Maybe life has dealt you a few hard knocks that you have struggled to recover from. Maybe you are a lot more like the blind beggar that Jesus healed at the gates of Jericho. Maybe you are sleeping on the porch of Adelaide Road Presbyterian Church and trying to fill that hole in your life with drink or drugs. Surviving by begging on the streets because you can't figure out how to be a part of the world around you where everyone else seems to have everything going for them and have their lives all sorted out. Rich or poor, and everything in between, we all know that we need something that the world does not, and cannot, provide.

Perhaps a rather obvious aspect of this story is the fact that Zacchaeus is very aware that he is not part of the crowd. He senses their disgust and hatred and is keenly aware of the extent of the separation between him and them. He feels drawn to Jesus but very wary of those around him. In our own society people like Zacchaeus may feel drawn to Jesus but because of our recent history they are very wary of any form of organized religion.

Both the New Atheists and their counterparts in dogmatic religion seem equally unappealing to them. They have enough experience of life to know that things are rarely black or white. Life is a lot more nuanced than that and situations manifest themselves in various shades of grey. They know that truth can't be adequately expressed in a slogan or a bumper sticker. They are rightly suspicious of easy, pat answers that smack of a sales pitch. They need someone to really get to know them, to understand their concerns, and to walk with them through life.

The paradoxical, complex nature of reality needs a faith that is able to embrace that. Jesus shows us how to do that in Luke 9 when he says, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" Do you think a question like that will resonate for a Zacchaeus? Absolutely! It puts into words what he is already wrestling with. We can learn how to ask questions like that by studying the ministry of Jesus.

For Christians, the truth is not just a set of propositions that you sign up to. It's so much more than that. Creeds and doctrines have their important place, but ultimate truth holds a lot more mystery than we are comfortable with. There is so much about God that we will never be able to get our heads around, and so we have to acknowledge that all our talk about him will always be inadequate.

Yet at the same time we know that Jesus is the image of the Father – that he fully reveals what God is like. That, in fact, Jesus himself is the way, the truth and the life. **Jesus himself is the truth.** Not statements about Jesus, not our beliefs or our rituals. We shouldn't put our faith in any of these things, but only in Jesus himself, who shows us the way to the Father. Jesus enters into relationship with Zacchaeus through his radical acceptance of him. His public announcement of his desire to spend the day with him, in spite of the crowd's disapproval, let Zacchaeus see that Jesus was **for** him, he was on his side. Zacchaeus had probably been ostracized and despised by the religious people that he knew, but he senses no judgement from Jesus, no threat, just this surprising desire to get to know him. We can learn a lot from that.

At the end of the day, it is all about grace. Did Zacchaeus deserve to have Jesus acknowledge him? No! Far less have the honour of Jesus' company for the day. But Jesus calls Zacchaeus down and Zacchaeus responds, jumping down out of the tree with great joy. The outcast is singled out for special honour. Jesus accepts him **first** – but note that it's only **afterwards** that Zacchaeus changes anything. We don't have to get our act together before Jesus can call our name. As Paul says, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8.) But **once** you are in a right relationship with God, through Jesus, **once** you become a part of God's mission to the world, then all sorts of amazing changes become possible for you. For God, all things are possible. Such as a notorious tax collector like Zacchaeus giving half his wealth away, and changing from someone who exploits the poor, to someone who acts justly.

Just like Zacchaeus Jesus calls each one of us by name. He wants to come home with us, to be in real relationship with us, and for us to join in the joy of being a collaborator with God in God's mission to this broken world. How will you respond?

Praise: There Is A Redeemer

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: His Mercy Is More

Benediction