

St. Philip's Anglican Church—4 November 2007

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Habakkuk 1.1-4, 2.1-4; Psalm 119.137-144, 2 Thessalonians 1.1-4, 11-12, Luke 19.1-10

Creative ways to meet Jesus!

Zacchaeus found himself up the proverbial tree. As chief tax collector and a wealthy man, he would have been hated by the people of Jericho. Tax collectors were collaborators with the occupying Roman forces and employed to collect taxes from the Jews. The taxes were over and above the temple tax or tithe. The system lent itself to abuse. Annual tax for an area was calculated and the tax collector paid it up front. It was left to the devices of the individual collector to recover his money and make a profit using a whole range of means — overcharging, cheating, collecting interest or other ways. Understandably tax collectors gained a reputation for dishonesty!

Early rabbinic writing is considered tax collection a despised trade and associated tax collectors with robbers, murderers and other “sinners”. But Zacchaeus was not just a tax collector. He was a *chief* tax collector, with other collectors working for him and adding another layer of employees all too keen to take their cut.

Zacchaeus was a prime example of those who were outcast and estranged from the God of the Jews. Jesus' last words in this story indicate just where Zacchaeus stood. He was “lost”!

Zacchaeus is the last person Luke's gospel mentions before Jesus enters Jerusalem. It is as though Luke saves the worst for last in order to make his point: “For the Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”

This last sentence of today's gospel could be a summary of Luke's entire gospel! It also recalls the parable of the prodigal son, where the man's son who “was lost ... is found”!

For all Zacchaeus's efforts actively to seek out Jesus, he only managed to climb a tree and “see Jesus”. Then Jesus stopped, looked up, and saw Zacchaeus. “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” There was an encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus set right his relations with other people *after* his encounter with Jesus who came as a guest to his house.

Jesus himself is salvation; he goes to the house and Zacchaeus is changed, putting his affairs in order in relationship with others. The outcome of Zacchaeus's encounter with Jesus shows us that salvation requires right relationship with each other, a pre-requisite for right relationship with God.

In this gospel episode, we also see a third aspect of prayer. (Two other aspects we met on the last two Sundays — assistance and humility.) Here we see creativity, innovation or invention in diligently seeking out God. Prayer is also action: putting our house in order so that we might receive Jesus, who is salvation, as our guest. Because Zacchaeus is a tax collector, wealthy, a sinner, we see that salvation is offered to everyone. No one is excluded.

But more is needed. We must put our own “house” in order. Now we can consider the question, “Who would be excluded from salvation?” Those who would not seek Jesus or change when they encounter him.

All of us sinners are invited to salvation and to know the healing, loving power of God. In this sense, no one is excluded.

Habakkuk speaks of the vigilance of living by faith. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, speaks of remaining steadfast in the face of affliction.

Most of us don't have to be as inventive or go to the extreme of climbing a tree to encounter Jesus. However, this gospel story warns us that we ought not to be complacent in our spiritual lives. We come to church on Sunday and encounter Jesus, and we might think that to be enough. Zacchaeus reminds us that we must also be willing always to change and to grow, being vigilant about our relationships with others, for these relationships are barometers of our relationship with God.

Creativity in seeking Jesus might mean that we are innovative and our personal prayer lives rather than continually reciting the prayers we may have learned long ago. What form of prayer might better meet our spiritual needs so that we can grow in our relationships? It might mean that we keep certain days of the year as a mini-retreat in order diligently to seek Jesus. It might mean not waiting for people to come to us and ask the help, but rather noticing others' needs and offering to help before they ask. In these and countless other ways we encounter Jesus and, in them, salvation comes to our house, too.