

Zacchaeus: salvation comes

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost—30 October 2016

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Luke 19.1-10

Introduction

Great little story to act out today. Sunday schools love Zacchaeus. There are numerous ditties about him climbing his tree to see Jesus. Children identify with him too and so do I. He could not see in a crowd.

Really, however he is a rather unpleasant character. He was probably not a member of the Jericho Rotary Club; lots of money and connections but all of it bad news for respectable citizens.

The worthy citizens of Jericho would have despised Zacchaeus and they probably would be horrified to think that 2000 years later we are still talking about the little crook.

He was chief tax collector. He had a whole district at his command with minor tax collectors doing his dirty work: Lots of money on the side as well as his legitimate take. And grubby money, whether it passes hands in a toll collector's office, a tin shack or across a computer screen in a Sydney/Melbourne skyscraper, it dirties the hands it passes through. And it always destroys others.

The locals had watched Zac grow rich on their money; lots of good food getting better all the time, no shortage of fine clothes or slave labour.

But we must add to this the sense of betrayal that locals would have felt; his contemporaries considered his profiteering traitorous. They longed to be free to worship God without Roman oversight, and grinding Roman taxes. The Roman yoke was a sign that they were still enslaved, dominated by an imperial power that demanded subservience for the benefits it conferred.

And here was a man who took their money, kept much himself and handed the rest over to Rome to support its continued oppression of Israel.

Perhaps the nearest analogy I can think of is watching some-one grow wealthy and powerful on the arms trade in the middle of a war zone and, at the same time, see your children die because of the arms.

As Luke notes "...he...was rich." Now that is a bad code in this Gospel as we have already noted. Remember the story last week in which Jesus says that

"...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

We are in territory where Jesus' hearers might well expect a few fireworks. They expected that Jesus was predictable. He hates rich people so we can expect him to lambaste this despicable man and barbecue him over a few hot moral and religious coals.

We pick up the story from there.

Jesus has entered the town of Jericho and passing through on the way up the hill to Jerusalem, to the cross

Up a tree 4-5

For some reason Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Jesus attracted attention by his word and actions. How deeply any of Jesus' words or actions had penetrated Zacchaeus' world we have no way of knowing. All we know is that he makes an ass of himself running around behind the crowd, then spotting a large sycamore tree ahead and running flat out to get there and shin up it like a schoolchild; not the action for a man concerned for his status or honour.

Then follows the most amazing interaction of all. Ensnoced in the tree and hoping that no-one has spotted him his world is now penetrated by a booming voice telling him to come down in a hurry, let's go home for lunch and spend the most searing part of the day talking together.

At this point our imaginations can take over and speculate about the inner conversation that Zacchaeus has: Who me? Why me? How embarrassing. What's in the fridge? O dear, I gave the cook afternoon off.

Out of the tree

All we know is that he seems to have come down with some alacrity and gladly welcomed Jesus with open hospitality. And that is step one in a process that is taking place here. We have not yet named the process but we will.

He could have continued to sit up the tree immobilized by embarrassment but he didn't. He responded to the request for hospitality and in that request and response he heard the voice of the God of Israel.

And at home

Somewhere in 'Upper Jericho' no doubt where all the rich build, a place that catches whatever breeze there might be, Jesus sits down to Zacchaeus' hospitality.

Now this is not in the house of a respectable citizen. Jesus is dining in the house of a hard man, a crafty man, a man with layers of graft and greed guiding his intellect and drowning his spirit. He is a cynical man and his heart is sick with that cynicism.

And here is Jesus relaxing in his home. What is a 'righteous' man doing here? What business has Jesus cozying up to this crook?

So the grumbling we have been seen before in the story wells up again. Jesus is mixing with the wrong crowd. Sometimes Pharisees complain about sinners and toll collectors, sometimes mothers and babies receive a serve but here it is the filthy rich but traitorous white collar criminal. In our world Jesus would have a Professional Standards problem. The crowd complains. Everyone has a gripe. He most certainly would bring the church into disrepute.

But everything is about to change. Just giving God a foot in the door is bad news if you want things to stay the same. Offering hospitality to God is bad for you.

So bad is God for you that Zacchaeus starts to give away his money.

I will give to the poor

Or more accurately "I am giving to the poor..." Right now. Out comes the cheque book or, in more modern times, the banking app on the smartphone. And he is giving it away. I have no idea how frantic his family got at that point. They may well have fainted.

What would it take for a stranger to come into your house and get you to open up banking app and hand out all the profits and more of the family business to the poor? No kudos let alone a return there. What would it take?

I will do justice

And then to pay back four fold all your fraudulent dealings? This is offering of justice to his neighbours blows the mind away: All freely done.

What might Jesus have said?

Some people say, ‘Well the story doesn’t tell us that Zacchaeus repented. He did not fall about the floor weeping and in sackcloth and ashes.’ Actually sackcloth and ashes are too easy. But opening the banking app?

Now that is real repentance. Something has changed this little crook. And that is why God is bad news for you and me. Welcome God in Jesus; open the banking app. Repentance is not religious, that is penance. Repentance is real. It touches real life issues. It turns life upside down and inside out.

When it touches the banking app for mercy and justice you know the kingdom has come. You now know that God’s rule has begun.

Now Jesus speaks for the first time since spotting Zacchaeus in the tree.

Salvation has come

“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.”

The prophet John the Baptist had said not long before that

“...God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

And He has raised up this little crook. Life out of a rock is a picture of a new creation, a resurrection; out of something hard and yielding a life. And that is what our little crook is. The hard man yields to the kingdom and finds life.

What John was saying was that belonging to the people of God was not simply a matter of ethnicity. Belonging to the people of God meant being willing to be transformed by Jesus’ topsy-turvy kingdom.

And that is what salvation means. Salvation means transformation to justice and mercy and thus setting things to rights. Salvation means community restored; it means relationships put to rights. And it begins with the relationship with God. And then it works its way to the banking app so justice and mercy can be done.

Zacchaeus has to trust Jesus’ God in all of this. That is all he has. That is what the rich man in last week’s story could not do. He could not trust the God who creates loving, justice making humans out of rocks.

And the contrast is remarkable. One leaves the encounter with Jesus sad. The other is consumed with joy.

God can find the way through the eye of the needle. The crowd were looking for a another delicious roasting of a rich man only to find that traitorous wretch has slipped through the eye of the needle and God is rejoicing with uproarious mirth.

The lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son have been found. Now the little, lost hard man and fraudster is found amidst great cosmic rejoicing at the wonder of grace.

Where do I fit in this story? And you?