



# *21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 30 October 2022

### READINGS

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 119: 137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12; Luke 19: 1-10

## *Zacchaeus*

Let us pray. As we think over the words of today's scriptures, may we hear the voice of God speaking to us. Amen.

Everyone loves the story of Zaccheus. I, as no doubt many of you, remember acting out the story in school assembly, or for the congregation in church. It is such a good story – the bad man meets Jesus and becomes a good man. Nice. But I think as those who are no longer in Sunday School, we can look at this in a little more depth.

Some background first. Jericho was an incredibly wealthy area. Its weather was suitable for certain kinds of agriculture, and the production of sweetly perfumed balsam and its dates were exported all over the known world. It was also well situated geographically and traders crossed it to go north, south and particularly east, so probably a great deal of trade, negotiations, and other business was conducted there. All this would make it quite wealthy. And where there is wealth, there is always a government wanting part of it. It was an area that was thoroughly taxed, which is why Zaccheus and his colleagues were there. The way the Romans organized things was, that they sold the right to collect taxes to a local agent, who was entitled to add his bit on to what was required. The fact that Zaccheus was "chief", ( and we don't hear of chief tax collectors anywhere else) meant that he would have had enough work to allow for men under him, who no doubt paid him for the privilege of collecting taxes. We can also gauge that this is a wealthy area where there are lots of taxes to collect.

But we are also told he was a small man. That could indicate quite a few things. Is he small because of genetics? A small man, son of small parents and father of small children? Possibly. That would make him different, and different people are treated differently. Jordan Peterson tells the story of a group of researchers trying to follow some zebra to assess their behaviour. Zebra move in herds, and stripes are stripes, which is part of their camouflage so they were not easily identified. As a result, the researchers marked those animals they were interested in with a red dot on their flank and got going with what they wanted to know. But they found that their dotted zebra were disappearing faster than the others. Eventually they worked it out. Lions don't hunt looking for the biggest or the easiest prey to catch, but they aim for the most noticeable. Difference is the key. So Zaccheus was different. Can you imagine a lifetime of bullying and missing out on dates, and never being allowed to be anything except the short man? He could well have become very bitter.

But there are other reasons why people are short. We have a member of this congregation who works amongst the starving and poverty-stricken families in the troubled parts of our continent, and she has spoken about the stunting of physical, mental and emotional growth of so many of our children who don't have enough to eat. If this is what affected Zaccheus, you can imagine that he could well have grown up determined NEVER to be hungry again, and the money he made was security against that fear, a fear always at the back of his mind.

We don't know what his background was, but we can presume that if he was a chief tax collector, he would have had a number of people under him – the only people with whom he interacted. They may have been a gang of outcasts, working for the Romans, at odds with their own people, but then, 'money is money.' Leaders of the community and socially successful people don't become tax-collectors for the conquering power. Zaccheus would have to keep an eye on such people that no one cheated the Romans, and no one cheated him either, and the group may well have been a collection of people who fitted in nowhere, and whose whole aim in life was to get as much out of as many people as possible, and while staying in the good books of Zaccheus was necessary, if they could get a few extra coins out of a sharp deal that he didn't know about, so be it. He also, certainly, was not on anyone's social list.

Now Jesus was coming. Why on earth would Zaccheus want to see Jesus? Maybe he was curious – was this Jesus just too good to be true? Was there a deep longing in Zaccheus to lead a different life? We don't know. But it seems that the crowd would not let him through to the front, most probably because crowd control in the modern sense didn't exist. It was push or be pushed. He didn't even appear to try. Even if he had wanted to, would there be the kind people who would let him move to the front so he could see? It doesn't seem likely. He was, after all, a tax-collector. Being used to looking after himself, he anticipated the way Jesus would be going, so he went on ahead and climbed the tree.

Jesus came and stopped below him, called him down and announced that he, Jesus, wanted to have lunch with Zaccheus in Zaccheus' house that day. A bit like Imtiaz Suleiman wanting to eat with the Gupta brothers. The crowd was not pleased. Jesus chose HIM over any other good citizen! Let's just be clear about this. Having people in your home was more than a convenient sandwich before moving on. Entertaining people was a cultural requirement in Middle Eastern countries, but it also represented a relationship between the people eating together. It was also carried out very much according to social strata in society. Where you sat was a reflection of your social position. So if Jesus was asking to visit Zacchaeus, he was saying in effect that Zacchaeus was worth it. Jesus was willing to be associated with him.

And Zacchaeus' response? I think we could call it a thorough conversion. Going way beyond the demands of the Jewish law. Paying back four times what he had stolen, giving half his possessions to the poor? That is one significant turn-around. Jesus' response was interesting. Salvation had come to Zacchaeus' house "because he is a Son of Abraham." Jesus didn't see him as BECOMING a Son of Abraham, he WAS a son on Abraham. Jesus came to save the lost. Zacchaeus' behaviour separated him from his people, but at bottom, he was a good Jew who behaved as a good Jew when he was treated as someone who, deep down, he knew he was. All the alienation of previous years disappeared because Jesus treated him as a friend.

Our modern world has become very disparate. "Woke" culture which began as an overt assertion against racism, hidden and otherwise, has been extended to include all aspects of cultural life, and you can become "cancelled" just for being different. Freedom of Speech is under threat everywhere, and the "ubuntu" of which we have always been so proud, is looking a little too threadbare in places.

Governments world wide do have departments which work conscientiously and well, but their public manifestations are of bodies which are either ineffective, totally crazy or downright wicked. There is little we can look up to with respect, and few people are true heroes to act as role models for our young people. Confusion reigns.

But Jesus sees what God created. We are and always will be God's creation, people for whom Christ died and whose purpose is to live as one people in the Body of Christ. In today's Thessalonians Reading, we hear Paul praying for the people of that church "that God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith" (v11). Paul is implying that the goodness is inherent and wonderful deeds are prompted by faith in the God who believes in God's people.

With Jesus coming to us as we huddle hidden from criticism and discrimination in our various safe little trees, we know he will see the good that is in all of us. His love will make us loving, and we will reach out beyond the boundaries that separate us. We are one with Christ, and no amount of exclusion, judgement, "cancelling" can alter that. All the crazy, inept, evil governments that make us despair are full of people that Jesus wants to love and bring the best out of. If Jesus looks into the deepest part of our souls and the souls of everyone else in our community, he finds incredible beauty. Let us respond to that assessment of us, and acknowledge we are so loved that we cannot help becoming lovable and loving too. And then let us look at one another and regard everyone, no matter who they are, as a the most wonderful being God ever made. That's true Christian love, and millions of Zacchaeus' – including the "Zacchaeus" characteristics we have, are waiting to be brought back into the fold. The love of Jesus conquers all, if we just let it.