

3rd Before Advent 2022

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem knowing that there he would face trial on trumped up charges and be executed. But His work on earth was far from finished. Jericho was the gateway town on the way to Jerusalem and the usual route to take if you were going up to Jerusalem from Galilee. All three synoptic Gospels, that is Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us something about what He did in Jericho, but only Luke tells us this story about Zacchaeus.

We are not given a lot of details in this story, but we can flesh it out quite easily. Just to be clear Zacchaeus is not the same person as the disciple Matthew, although they were both tax collectors. We know tax collectors were hated and despised. Well, no-one really enjoys paying their taxes, do they? But the tax collectors in Jesus' time weren't just agents working for a just and fair regime. The taxes they collected weren't for the good of the people, to build and maintain schools and hospitals and finance an army for the safety of the country. They worked for the Romans and the taxes they collected were for the good of the Roman Empire, now I guess you might argue that the Roman Empire did provide safety and some public amenities for those people whose land they occupied, you know the old Monty Python joke, what have the Romans ever done for us? But they were an enemy who had taken those lands by force, occupied them illegally and ruled them mercilessly. Most tax collectors were thieves, they enjoyed the protection of their Roman masters who didn't care if they took a bit extra for themselves and got rich from the proceeds. They were collaborators, and collaborators are often hated even more than the invaders they work for because they have betrayed their own people and are working against them. It was in the interests of tax collectors to know everyone and to keep their ear to the ground. They would have been very aware of what was going on, so it is not surprising that

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Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. And his interest was piqued, he wanted to know more, he wanted to see this miracle worker for himself. And now he hears that Jesus is in town. Now he would have had few, if any friends, if he wanted to see Jesus, he would have to go by himself. Now we know he was a small man and wherever Jesus went, crowds gathered. So, Zacchaeus took the opportunity to climb up a sycamore tree to be able to see what was going on. Jesus is walking by, but He stops and looks straight up at Zacchaeus, tells him to come down and invites himself to dinner. This was not what Zacchaeus was expecting, but he responds straight away. And the natural response of those who saw this exchange is to mutter against Jesus – why would he choose to honour this hated traitor, who added to the misery of their lives, this sinner? But meeting Jesus instantly changes the heart of Zacchaeus. We are not told that Jesus asked anything of him except a place to rest and eat, but Zacchaeus willingly declares that he will give away half of his riches and repay four times the amount that he has stolen. And Jesus says that salvation has come to this house. He says that no matter what Zacchaeus has done, he too is worth saving and that after all is Jesus' mission, to seek and save the lost.

Now a couple of things interest me in all of this. The first is people's reaction when they hear about Jesus. Some have absolutely no interest at all. They pooh-pooh the idea that there is anything to see or believe in. They have their own ideas, their own beliefs, their own religion and either don't even believe that Jesus exists, or don't believe he has anything to offer them. Some people think they know all about Jesus' teachings, maybe even hold Him to have been a good man, but still are not interested. Some are told by others and believe in Jesus, maybe even come to Church all their lives, but never really have a desire to meet Him for themselves, they don't want that level of commitment.

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Church can actually be a great place to hide from God. You can go every week and pretend to yourself that you are being a good Christian, without allowing Jesus to impact your life in any significant way at all. I spent a few years dodging God. We went to a great Church in Beckenham, lovely people, fantastic social life. I was on the social committee, we had discos and pantos and summer outings. There were lots of couples with young children, there was a babysitting circle and a young wives group – we still meet actually, only now we are the old wives, interestingly, only two or three of us still go to church or profess any faith. At the time I loved it. I even prayed sometimes, but not with any real enthusiasm. And I can't say that I was really happy. In fact, our marriage was not good at all for most of that time and we were hiding from the one person who could and eventually did restore us and renew our relationship. So, some people are happy with a second-hand experience of God and others are scared of commitment, scared about what Jesus might ask of them if they let Him get too close. But some people when they hear about Jesus, they want to see for themselves, they want to know what he is all about, they want to meet Him, and they want Him to change their lives.

The second thing that interests me is how different people react when they meet Jesus. You would think that anyone meeting Him in the flesh would react like the first disciples, leaving their boats and following Him, or like Zacchaeus, instantly welcoming him and then joyfully repenting of the past and wanting to put things right and be a better person. But that is not what happened. Some who met Him hated Him and plotted to kill Him, some were indifferent, some recognised Him but like the rich young ruler found the price of following Him too high to pay. Some wanted to seriously follow Him but put it off until later.

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My experience is that if you want to meet Jesus for yourself, then you will find that He is already looking for you. Like Zacchaeus, you will find that He is looking straight at you. But if you want a relationship with Him, then like any relationship, you do have to work at it. Jesus warns us to count the cost of following Him. There have been times in my life when I have wanted nothing else but to know Jesus. But there have also been times when I have wandered off, when I have hidden from Him, when I have kept Him at arm's length. I still sometimes have doubts and fears. Doubt can be a healthy part of faith. But there came a time when I knew that I had to go all in. There came a point when I realised that however bad things got, whatever I went through, life is always better when I am following Jesus, talking to Him seeking refuge in Him, no matter what. And He never promised easy – look at Paul, shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, eventually killed and yet always faithful and even joyful because of His relationship with Jesus. But I still sometimes forget, get distracted, sometimes being so busy doing things for Him or for others that I forget that I need to spend time being with Him. If that is you today, He is here, waiting patiently for you, ready to enfold you in His loving arms. The verse that I have had running through my head while I was writing this is, Psalm 34:8, Taste and see that the Lord is good!