



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Robert Pope on 30th October 2022

Readings: Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 19: 1-10

Have you ever gone to great lengths to see someone or something? Maybe queued for hours to shuffle pass a great work of art or perhaps stood in a crowd for a glimpse of a celebrity or a star?

Events of recent weeks saw people willing to queue for over a day to pass by the late Queen's coffin. It wasn't something I considered doing myself, though it was clearly something meaningful for the around a quarter of a million people who took time out to mark her passing.

I was reminded of two events from my youth. When I was very young, a treat in the summer holidays was to take the train to London for the day. One year, we visited the Tower of London. My only recollection of it was of shuffling passed the crown jewels in a long queue and feeling very tired. A couple of years ago I visited again. It being just as we came out of lockdown, there were very few people there and we walked straight through the exhibition. It seemed a much smaller collection to my adult eyes – and a much less tiring experience for my adult legs – than it did as a child.

The other event was in 1977. The Queen visited my home town and opened a leisure centre during the celebrations to mark her Silver Jubilee. I was around 7 at the time and my recollection is that we walked for what seemed like hours and stood in a crowd along the road. We stood and waited, and waited, and waited. Occasionally a police car would pass and those inside would announce that she wasn't far away and it wouldn't be much longer. That must have happened at least three times! Eventually, a motorcade appeared, a black rolls Royce passed: I think the queen was in the other side of the car. But it was all over in seconds. I remember thinking then that I wouldn't ever do that again!

There would have to be very deep, existential reasons for me to make such an effort to see someone again. And that is what I think of when I read this very well-known story about Zacchaeus.

The story of Zacchaeus is one of profound transformation, one where it is appropriate to declare that 'Today salvation has come to this house', for a life which was no more than destructive appears to have turned around.

It begins with Zacchaeus attempting to see, to glimpse, who Jesus was. That little phrase is telling: perhaps he had heard much about Jesus – the miracle worker who taught with authority, perhaps even the one who seemed able to forgive sins – maybe Jesus' reputation had preceded him, and Zacchaeus, feeling trapped in a lifestyle that gave no satisfaction, and increasingly reviled by his fellows, was looking for a way out. Maybe Zacchaeus was inquisitive as to why the crowd had gathered and decided to hang around out of curiosity.

Either way we do not know, but the fact that he did, that day, decide to wait with the crowds to glimpse Jesus, the one who was to pass that way, would have a profound effect on him.

We don't know much about Zacchaeus, and virtually nothing beyond this passage, though there is a tradition in the early church that he became the first bishop of Caesarea. There is some irony in the story, bearing in mind how the story pans out, because the name Zacchaeus literally means 'pure' or 'innocent'.

What we do know is that he was chief tax collector in Jericho, which was a renowned centre for the production and export of balsam and therefore a place where a tax collector could become very rich – which is precisely what we learn about Zacchaeus.

The crowd identify Zacchaeus as a sinner, and traditionally this has been connected with his role as a tax collector. This is not because the collecting of tax is in itself sinful – though I'm sure that for those of us paying tax it sometimes feels like that – but because, in Palestine at the time, it meant, first of all, working for the Romans who were the occupying forces. Anyone working for the Romans was considered a traitor. But secondly it was practised in a way that seemed unjust. Scholars tell us that tax collectors were not paid for doing their job but they were able to place an additional levy on taxes which would be their way of making a living. Although the Romans set some limits on this levy, it seems that the collectors frequently went beyond those limits. This might lie behind the assertion that Zacchaeus was 'rich' as well as by the hint of 'fraud' in his confession.

Although it isn't explicit in the text, we can infer from it that, despite his wealth, this was not a satisfying existence for Zacchaeus. Whether he had intentionally sought a way out, a repentance, a turning around of his life or not, his willingness to change as dramatically and as immediately – from a grabbing of wealth to a sharing of it – suggests that he was unhappy with the state of affairs. But the transformation hinges on what seems to be a coincidence.

As a man 'short in stature' he could not see because the crowd was too great and so he climbed a tree. As he walks passed, Jesus looks up into the tree, calls Zacchaeus by name – in itself a significant point: he is not a nameless non-person in the midst of a crowd but he is a real individual who is known by his own name. But there could be an echo here of the prophecy of Isaiah where God says to Israel 'Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name, you are mine'. Jesus calls him by name and tells Zacchaeus to come down from the tree because he plans to stay at his house.

There is an inverted hospitality here. Jesus calls on Zacchaeus to be hospitable, to take him into his home where, presumably, he would be called upon to supply refreshments and entertainment. But in truth it is Jesus who is being hospitable by reaching out to Zacchaeus the social outcast. The crowds look down on him as a sinner and criticize Jesus for being a guest in his house.

But Zacchaeus responds differently because of the non-judgmental way that Jesus accepts him and accepts his hospitality: he will give away a high proportion of his wealth and will make right any fraudulent behaviour. And so Jesus declares: 'Today salvation has come to this house'.

There are at least three things to take from this passage.

First: as in other passages, though less explicitly here, Jesus' teaching is that no one should look down on and despise another human being, whatever it might be that they have done. No one has the right to be 'holier than thou' or to point an accusing finger, or to pray that we are thankful not to be like these other people. No one should point out the speck in a neighbour's eye and ignore the log in their own. For even this Zacchaeus is 'a son of Abraham'.

In the midst of the controversy surrounding the destruction of icons, John Calvin reminded the people of Geneva that if they wanted to see the image of God, then they should look to their neighbour.

We might deplore what someone has done, we might be perplexed or confused by what they say and do. We might even oppose it as a matter of principle (or even of Christian conviction), but we must never forget that the one who stands before us is a fellow human being and that, as Calvin implies, we see God's image reflected back to us first and foremost in that other person, our neighbour, before we see it in any way reflected in ourselves.

Second: though not explicit, this passage supports similar teaching elsewhere that with great riches comes great responsibility.

That Zacchaeus was rich is not in itself the subject of criticism or rebuke. There is a hint that he might have defrauded others, but this is not certain – the passage includes that significant little word 'if'. But where he has failed is that he has grown his wealth without concern for others. He has become rich

while his heart has hardened to the plight of those around. He has amassed a fortune but not nurtured compassion for his fellow human beings. The remedy comes when his heart has melted and he accepts a new priority in his life: 'half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor', he says. This is no act of penance. It is not an attempt to earn merit as a 'good work'. Instead it is an act of grace born out of the receipt of grace. With great wealth comes great responsibility.

There has been a lot of speculation around this point with recent events in the government of this country. I will say no more in case my point is misconstrued, but I will repeat: with great wealth comes great responsibility.

Third: what is it, then, that proves to be effective in this story? Why is it that, of all days, this is the one when Zacchaeus makes his momentous decision, when Zacchaeus turns his life around by transforming his priorities, when Jesus can say 'Today, salvation has come to this house'?

The fact is that this brief encounter with Jesus is a moment when Zacchaeus, perhaps for the first time ever, experiences grace. The reaction of the crowd suggests he was excluded from his community. We can rightly infer that he didn't have close relationships with anyone else and the likelihood is that he was shunned by all. He had seen that this was a huge price to pay for being rich. And when Jesus looks to him as a 'son of Abraham' and treats him as a fellow human being in whom God's image is reflected, and when this happens despite the fact that his actions have perhaps not deserved it, he experiences an acceptance and an affirmation that is truly life-changing. Salvation comes because a destructive life is transformed into compassionate life. Without that transformation, there is no salvation.

The story of Zacchaeus is one of encounter with Jesus which is an encounter with life-transforming grace, a grace which resets priorities, a grace which leads to action. We do not know for certain what happened next for Zacchaeus, but it would be more than an anti-climax were it the case that he did not live up to the transformation he appears to have undergone.

The challenge to us as we leave this place is to carry our own experience of grace with us into our lives this coming week. To see the image of God in our neighbour, to affirm our common humanity, to be less willing to judge and condemn, to nurture compassion and to act on it, and to be the means by which others experience grace too.

For it is by such small steps that God's Kingdom among us is revealed on earth as it is in heaven.