

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 19 July

Isolation Radio Talk

Trinity 6

Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1-10)

So you think it's worth hiding?

Good morning.

Let me introduce Zacchaeus. He lived in Jericho; he was not tall; and was not liked – he was a dishonest Tax Collector. Curious then to see him when Jesus came to Jericho, he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a Sycamore tree to get a good view.

When Jesus got close, he called up, 'Zacchaeus come down, I'm going to stay with you'. Zacchaeus, though astonished, I suspect, was delighted; the crowd on the other hand, you can hear the grumbles; 'He is going to eat with a sinner. God forbid'.

When they got inside Zacchaeus said, 'Lord, I shall give half my goods to the poor; if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay them four times over.' Jesus replied, 'Salvation has come to *this* house'.

What then does this story mean?

Now, you have all played hide-and-seek as children. The trouble comes when you play as adults; *life* is not a game. You might say 'such and such a person is looking for God'; however, it is always the other way round; God comes looking for you. In the Garden of Eden, says the Bible, God came looking for Adam (remember Adam represents humanity). 'Where are you?' God calls; Adam hides, he is afraid. It is the same for Zacchaeus and maybe for you. The story is not so much that Zacchaeus is trying to see Jesus; he hides from him, and Jesus seeks him.

I have told you Zacchaeus is a small man; he always tried to be a big man (attempting to use money to gain wealth and status); but the point of the story is that because Jesus comes looking for him, he becomes a *great* man. Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus; he was a celebrity and he wanted to see what he was like.

That rings true, does it not? You prefer to trade images or talk about what you *think* a person is like, rather than really try to meet them. You hide the real you and prefer others to hide too. Do you see that, if you do that to each other, you do it to God; your worship, your prayers, the way you live your religion becomes, a search, not for the living God, but an attempt to hide from the living God.

You protect yourself well and religion becomes a safety device. You make God in our own image; there is a word for that - idolatry. It keeps defences up; it is safer that way. The merciful truth is that God does not reveal what God is really like in one go (just as it is when you fall in love; discovering the real lovee as you both journey together in time). You see only the truth you can bear; but do not forget, the initiative lies with the living God; it does *not* lie with you.

In Zacchaeus you see how a living encounter leads to more than just change: to transformation. No wonder Zacchaeus prefers to hide in a tree to see what Jesus is like; he did not want Jesus to see what he is like. He was clinging on - he had to cling on, or he might fall out. He had clung on all his life. Jesus takes the initiative – 'Zacchaeus, come on down'. Whenever had anyone asked to come to his house? He had no visitors book - his name was in no visitors book; he was in everybody's bad books and now, ... and now, it was just possible, he was going to get into the only book worth getting in - the book of life.

Everything is reversed. He has a new outlook - *metanoia* is the Greek word - transformation in one's way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion - your word is repentance. The Gospel from which this story comes, says Zacchaeus 'received him joyfully'. What was the first priority now comes last; the last priority comes first.

What you are blind to, becomes shatteringly important, when you meet God. It always does. The crowd did not like it; not one bit; crowds can be volatile but also amazingly conservative; perhaps a bit like Church people. The crowd, although they despised Zacchaeus, curiously resented the change in him and what Jesus did. 'He's going in to eat with sinners'. Not proper at all.

Unwittingly the crowd put its finger on the very heart of the gospel. It is *good news* that although you are sinners, you can welcome to your home and into the deepest part of your lives the living God. How else, would you dare take communion, or pray with two or three together- knowing Christ is there too - if you do not know Jesus is ready to come in as the guest of a woman or man who is a sinner.

That ... is the turning point: that ... is the lesson of Zacchaeus. Jesus touches your humanity; God, through Jesus, has made it possible for you to be made clean and healed; brought into God's presence. It is God's initiative and not yours. People often seem not to understand this; they do not want to understand it. If the story of Zacchaeus means anything; and it surely does; if our understanding of Jesus as the very image of God is true; and I believe it is; then there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular - there is nothing you call your private life that is apart from God.

Most of us, most of the time, do not want our religion mixed up with the rest of us because otherwise it might, it just might transform things, and that could be uncomfortable. 'You stay in heaven, you stay in the church, God, and we will stay away from church, God; come on now, you can leave the real world to us. Religion has got to be different - be in a museum like building, speak in Shakespearean language, however artificial, or Latin, be passively involved in repeating words and motions not being impacted by them; so that it does not make any difference to real life because we do not understand it.' About Zacchaeus so the bible account goes, 'there was a general murmur of disapproval. That murmur has always been there and still is.

But God's grace is just wonderful; it opens options you never thought possible. Salvation came to Zacchaeus' house not by anything he did, but because of what Jesus did. It was because of his weakness; his recognition of his weakness; his understanding of who he was before God, that Zacchaeus has found God's strength. This little man became a great man and an example for all time and all eternity.

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind, but now I see.

It was grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
the sun forbear to shine;
but God, who called me here below,
will be forever mine.
Amen.