

LUKE 19:1-10
ST JOHN'S, 3.11.19, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus told the rich ruler in the chapter before this (18:25). The rich ruler kept all the commandments, but couldn't bring himself to sell everything he had and give to the poor, and then to follow Jesus. Jesus then said that although it might be impossible with men, it is possible with God: God can save anyone.

"But I'm not rich at all! So what's this story got to do with me?" you might ask. As we think about Zacchaeus, bear something in mind. If we had a list of every single person on this earth, with Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates at the top, and the very poorest person at the bottom, you and I would easily be within the top 10% of the list. We're all rich beyond the wildest dreams of most people in the world. So let's keep things in perspective. You and I are rich, even if most people in Britain are better off than we are.

We're going to think about this story in three parts: Zacchaeus, the collector of taxes – before he met Jesus; Jesus, the Saviour of sinners; and Zacchaeus, the son of Abraham – after he met Jesus.

ZACCHAEUS THE COLLECTOR OF TAXES

We don't know very much about Zacchaeus, but we can learn quite a lot about him from his background. He worked in Jericho, which is built near an oasis, at the bottom of the mountains of the Judean wilderness,

surrounded by desert. In Zacchaeus' day, it was a rich town, where tax collectors would have been able to make a lot of money.

The Romans gave the right to collect taxes to whoever was the highest bidder. So long as they got their money, they turned a blind eye to tax collectors who cheated the system. A tax-collector could legitimately collect enough money to pay the Romans, to cover his expenses and to make enough profit to live on. But most of them ripped people off, and became very rich in the process. People hated them because they were collaborating with the Romans, and for making a fortune at the expense of their neighbours.

We know from v 8 that Zacchaeus was a typical tax-collector, who regularly cheated people: that verse is better translated: to those whom I have defrauded, I restore it fourfold.

So Zacchaeus was rich. But he probably had very few, if any, friends. And the more he tried to gain satisfaction from money, the further he moved away from God. Presumably, Zacchaeus had found that riches couldn't buy him happiness. So when he heard that Jesus was coming through the town, he was determined to see him. After all, Jesus was known to welcome tax-collectors. One of his closest friends was a tax-collector. Zacchaeus was so determined to see Jesus, that he didn't care if he looked ridiculous. He climbed a tree on Jesus' route, and waited for him to come through.

JESUS THE SAVIOUR OF SINNERS

As Jesus walked under Zacchaeus' tree, he *looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today"* (v 5).

The crowd didn't like this. To them, it was as if Jesus was saying, "I don't have a problem with the fact that this man has cheated you all, and that he's collaborating with the Romans. In fact, I support him in what he's doing". We know that Jesus didn't have that kind of attitude. He simply loved people, and wasn't bothered if he ruined his own reputation by spending time with them.

By inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house, Jesus is offering both to give something to Zacchaeus and to receive something from him. He's clearly offering to receive Zacchaeus' hospitality, something which Zacchaeus wouldn't have many opportunities to give. And Jesus is implicitly offering to give Zacchaeus God's forgiveness for the ways in which Zacchaeus has disobeyed him.

At the end of this passage, Jesus says he went to Zacchaeus' house because, *The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost* (v 10). Jesus may not invite himself into our houses in a physical sense, but he does invite himself into our hearts and lives in a spiritual sense. Its up to us whether or not we welcome him in. We can say "no", just as Zacchaeus could have said "no". Jesus is still seeking and saving the lost. And no matter how upright our lives are, we're all "lost" until Jesus comes to seek and to save us. None of us has done anything to deserve Jesus inviting himself into our lives, offering to share our lives

with us, and offering to forgive us for everything we've ever done wrong.

Unlike Zacchaeus, we know the price Jesus had to pay to put right our relationship with God. Jesus gave up the splendour of heaven, where angels worshipped him, to be born in a stable, and to live an obscure life in an occupied territory. He refused to *appeal to [his] Father* for the assistance of *more than twelve legions of angels* (Matthew 26:53), but instead allowed himself to be arrested, flogged, mocked, and nailed to a cross. When Jesus went to the cross, he went much further than risking his reputation by accepting hospitality from tax-collectors. He did it to take the punishment for everything which any of us has ever done, or ever will do, to disobey God.

ZACCHAEUS THE SON OF ABRAHAM

When Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' house, Zacchaeus jumps down out of the tree, and welcomes Jesus into his home *joyfully* (v 6). The immediate change in him shows that he understood who it was he was entertaining. Jesus didn't ask for anything from Zacchaeus except some food and a bed for the night. He implicitly offered to put right Zacchaeus' relationship with God, with no further strings attached. He didn't even mention Zacchaeus' money.

Up to this point, Zacchaeus has been 'lost': he'd forgotten who he was. As Jesus invites himself to stay, Zacchaeus remembers that he's a true descendant of a very rich ancestor, Abraham; Zacchaeus remembers that he's eternally loved by God; Zacchaeus realises that God longs for him so much, that he's sent his son on purpose to find him and rescue

him from his lostness; and even more than that: God's sent his son personally to come to his home to show that he accepts him! And Zacchaeus understands at last what the Jewish faith is all about. God's love for Zacchaeus set him free from the compulsion to make and to hoard money. And so Zacchaeus makes the momentous announcement in verse 8, that he's going to give away half his money, as well as repay fourfold those whom he's defrauded. This was going way beyond the requirements of the Old Testament law. It's no wonder that Jesus was so certain that *salvation has come to this house* (v 9). Zacchaeus was showing the results of it in a spectacular way.

CONCLUSION

When you first became a Christian, you may well have responded in a similar way to Zacchaeus. But how long ago was that? In Revelation 2:4, Jesus tells the church in Ephesus, *I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first*. New Christians are often a challenge to well-established Christians, and Zacchaeus is a challenge to us all.

Zacchaeus understood immediately what many Christians take years to work out. The Lord loves us. He loves us so much that he died for us. He came to seek and to save what was lost. It's always Jesus who takes the initiative, and this story shows that he can bring anyone into his kingdom – even a man as rich as Zacchaeus. The Lord's done so much for us, and given us so much, before we even give him a thought. The Lord has given us so much; our question should always be, "What can I give him?"

Money is one of the main things which we can give back to God. The Bible seems to teach us that one of the best things we can do with our money is to give it away – generously and gladly. When we learn to do that, we begin to see how our giving is one way we can express our gratitude to God, our love for him, and our love for our fellow men and women. And we learn to trust God to provide us with all we need and more. As the Lord says through the prophet Malachi, *put me to the test, . . . if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need* (Malachi 3:10).

Money isn't the only thing we can give back to God, of course. In fact, giving him our money is simply a sign that we've given him our hearts and our lives. When Zacchaeus was saved, his heart was changed. He responded by giving away vast sums of money. It must have had a huge impact on the lives of those around him. As we respond to our relationship with God, as we allow him to change our hearts, so God's love will have an impact on the lives of those around us, because our behaviour will change. If your relationship with God doesn't have an impact on every single one of your relationships with other people, then maybe you need to allow God to change your heart.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Today, he sends us, in his name, to seek the lost and bring them to him to be saved. We're called to work with him, as he continues to change people's hearts and lives, helping them to realise that they too, are eternally loved by God; that God longs for them so much, that he's sent his son on purpose to find them and rescue them from their lostness; and that they can be set free from whatever compulsion it is that's spoiling their lives.