

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

ZACCHAEUS

15th November 2015

Isaiah 58:6-12

Luke 19:1-10

How many times have you heard the story of Zacchaeus, do you think? A hundred? Two hundred? It is one of the stories we meet with in Sunday School, because everyone likes the idea of this little man running and climbing a tree just to see Jesus. And we love to think of a bad, greedy, and yes, a rich man turning around and becoming generous and giving his wealth away. And since we are not rich, or don't think of ourselves that way; and since we have not cheated anyone, or certainly won't admit it if we have; and since we are not small and even if we are we will never have to climb a tree to see Jesus, it is not a threatening story, not one which asks too much of us.

I was one of a group of about twelve people who met on Monday night this week to think about giving a message in church. There is always more that any of us can learn! This story of Zacchaeus was the passage that was given us to look at. And as we listened to it read to us, as we compared translations, as we thought about who it was aimed at I began to wonder if Zacchaeus hasn't been misjudged over the centuries. I began to wonder if we haven't all acted just like the crowd in the story, and allowed our assumptions to cloud our judgement. Yes he was small, and yes he was rich and yes he collected taxes, but was he ever really wicked? Did he really cheat? And is that what the story is about?

And so today I want us to think more about the crowd than we do about Zacchaeus. Because when we look at the crowd and at Jesus' interaction with them we come to see the story in a different way, and we might see its relevance to us in a different way as well.

On Monday, as we talked and worked on the passage at one point I heard myself demand that we go back to the Greek, and the thing that had grabbed my attention, that I had never even considered before, was this. In some translations, in the oldest translations – and I have checked now, in the Greek – when Zacchaeus hurries down the tree to take Jesus to his home and the people begin to grumble, Zacchaeus addresses Jesus in the present tense. He doesn't say, as some translations have him say "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor...and if I have defrauded anyone I will pay back four times as much." He says that he is doing these things. He speaks of what he is doing. Now it may be that he meant that this is what he is going to be doing from now on, the present starts now, now that Jesus has met him and treated him as a person who is not to be shunned. But on the other hand it might not mean that. It might be that Zacchaeus always did this, but that no one knew about it, or believed it.

Zacchaeus, you see, was not a popular person, not because of who he was as a man, but because of what he did for an occupation. Tax collectors were unpopular, working as they did with the Romans, and since they were unpopular, people did not feel the need to look at them as individuals, or be fair to them as individuals. Some probably were corrupt, and so all could be assumed to be corrupt. They were treated as something which was a necessary evil, but as people, as individuals they didn't matter. But Jesus has given the lie to this idea. He has seen that Zacchaeus has been very keen to see him, so keen that he has run, which men in that culture did not do, and he has climbed a tree – which grown people emphatically did not do! He has thrown his dignity to the winds because getting to see Jesus was more important.

And here comes Jesus, making his way through the crowds. I don't know if these were crowds who had come specifically to see Jesus – they might have, since he has just healed a blind man on his way into the city, but they might just be the usual crowds of a busy market town. However, crowds there were, and a small man needed to think and then act if he wanted to see past them, to see Jesus. And Jesus knew what he had done, and in all that crowd his attention focussed on just that one man. If you have ever looked into a camera with a good telephoto lens, you can imagine how Jesus saw the whole scene, the buildings, the tree-lined streets and the people, so many people. And then, just as you do as you gradually extend your telephoto lens, he focussed in more and more on one place, ignoring the other things and people that crowded round him, shutting out the buildings, the disciples, the other people, and finally looking just at one man, and him up a tree.

The crowd only see the job. They brand Zacchaeus a “sinner” and will have nothing at all to do with him because of that. He may or may not have done what they think he has, cheating his way to wealth, but even if he has, he is still a person. Everyone is still a person. No one should be dismissed as unworthy to be considered as a person. No one. Not Hitler, not Paul Pot, not even the fighters for ISIS.

Jesus saw him as a person, not as a tax-man. And when Zacchaeus made his declaration about his giving away, about how he runs, or will run his business, Jesus turns to the crowd, that crowd which had branded Zacchaeus a “sinner” and said “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham.”

He is a son of Abraham. He is one like you, that is what Jesus is saying. To be a son of Abraham was the Jew's greatest boast, and Jesus is saying that it applies just as much to Zacchaeus as it does to anyone else in that crowd. We never hear Jesus rebuking Zacchaeus, but in addressing that remark to the crowd, he is certainly rebuking them. How dare they think that they are better than this man, this tax-man? How dare they decide to ignore him as a human being? How dare they think that they are children of Israel if they are not prepared to live with the humble selflessness that Zacchaeus has shown, both in his undignified searching after Jesus, and in his declared habitual honesty and generosity with his riches?

Zacchaeus is also a son of Abraham. Also – as well as them. Also - as well as whatever job he does. He is also a son of Abraham, and he belongs in that group. He belongs and should be accepted, just like anyone else. When Jesus looks at that crowd in Jericho, he is not pleased. He is not pleased to hear them dismiss anyone as a “sinner” and he doesn't want to hear them saying that this “sinner” is or should be beneath Jesus' notice. If you ever hear anyone say that church is not for the likes of

them, then we stand as condemned as that crowd. The Son of Man came to seek and to save sinners. He said so. And that means that his people should embrace those lost, not as lost, but as people.

Time and time again in the gospels we find Jesus focussing on the people who are on the edge of society. He focuses on them as individuals- whether they are ill, or disabled, or of the wrong race, or immoral. He reaches out to lepers and the blind, to the lame and the deaf. He talks with and helps Samaritans and Syro-phoenicians and even Romans. He accepts the adoration of prostitutes and eats with those to whose parties no respectable person would go. And each time we find him not looking on groups of people, but on individuals. Not working to reach out to different categories, but to reach out to the people who are before him.

Today in our prayers we will be thinking of the work of Crossreach, which is the Church of Scotland's social care arm. Crossreach works with older people, with people who are addicted to drink or drugs and with their families. Crossreach works with children who are in various ways challenging, either because of how they have been born or because of the way that they have ended up behaving. Crossreach works with people with various psychological and mental states. Crossreach works with people. That is what is most important. The people who come to use its services may have various problems or states of being, but they are helped because they are people. Not all are Christian people, by any means, but all are those who for various reasons are people who are too often on the edges of society. And the people at Crossreach know that Jesus is very often to be found at the edges of society as well.

Way back, hundreds of years before Jesus, Isaiah had challenged the people to "remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil..." That is a challenge that still comes to us. The challenge not to run with the crowd when the crowd is not running in Jesus' way. The challenge to think for ourselves, to view people as God does, as the individuals who are made in his image. The challenge to accept and welcome all who would seek after Jesus, however unconventional their methods or their life-style might be. Amen.

--- 000 ---