

Zaccheaus

As I was contemplating our gospel reading, the story of Zaccheaus' encounter with Jesus, for this morning, two Sunday School songs came to mind.

The first was of course "There once was a man from Jericho called Zaccheaus... now the Hebrews, they were tall, but Zaccheaus, he was small, yet the Lord loved Zaccheaus better than them all"

And the second was Joshua fought the battle of Jericho (where the walls came a-tumbling down).

Jericho is a significant city in the bible... you might remember it was also the last stop for the prophets Elijah and Elisha before Elijah was taken up to heaven in the chariot of fire.

Jericho still exists today: it's located near the Jordan River in the West Bank, about 30km east of Jerusalem. The city has a reasonable claim to being the oldest city in the world - archaeologists have unearthed the remains of more than 20 successive settlements in Jericho, the first of which dates back 11,000 years. When Jesus walked the streets of Jericho, it was already an ancient city.

The photo on our screen today was taken in 2013, and it shows what is purported to be the sycamore fig tree that Zaccheus climbed to see Jesus all those years ago.

We don't know a lot about Zacchaeus, but we do know two things: that he was short, and that he was a tax collector. I'm not sure that working for the tax office today will earn you much respect in Australian society generally, but as I shared last week, we do know that being a tax collector in first century Judea was certain make you disliked. Zaccheaus wouldn't have been liked by the people in his community.

We know that tax collectors had reputations for overcharging for taxes – not only did they collect taxes for the Roman Empire, but they also received a commission from their collections and often – usually even - took a bit extra for themselves. They had sold out to the Romans, and they had become traitors to their own people in doing so. They were regarded as irredeemable sinners – they weren't welcome in synagogues or people's houses, they'd become wealthy, certainly, but they generally didn't have a lot of friends to enjoy their wealth with.

And so, "When Jesus reached the spot [where Zaccheaus had climbed the tree], he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (19:5) the reaction from the crowd was quick and clear. "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner". (19:7)

Jesus was a respected teacher. Clearly, a man of God, if not yet recognised as the Messiah. But here Jesus was, a holy man, choosing to stay with a sinner – a despised tax collector. Surely, there were better people, less sinful people, holier people that Jesus could stay with. Surely.

How offensive was this choice for all of those people, especially those religious leaders, who had declared tax collectors sinful! Surely Jesus should stay at the home of a righteous person.

While the religious leaders decried the actions of Zaccheaus and the other tax collectors, they were hardly without sin themselves. They did pretty well out of the system – and as we heard last week in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, they had become generally arrogant, self-righteous and proud.

But Zaccheaus was anything but proud. He climbed a tree for his chance to just see Jesus passing by. Climbing trees is not generally something grown-ups do, is it? You wouldn't see a first century Pharisee climbing a tree.

We heard that, "He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way." (19:3-4)

And he did see Jesus. But more importantly, Jesus saw him. And Jesus reached out to him.

Jesus called out to Zacchaeus; he called him by name – and that puts me in mind of John chapter 10:3, when Jesus tells us about the Good Shepherd, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." And there, in Jericho, Jesus called Zaccheus by name.

And not only did Jesus call him, but he also offered a gesture of friendship – of grace and love. I must stay at your house today."

I must stay at your house. I don't care about what you have done. I don't care that all these other people think you're terrible. I want to stay at your house. I want to have fellowship with you.

Zaccheaus responded at once... "So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly." (19:6). He would have been used to everyone avoiding him, but here was Jesus wanting to be with him.

Zaccheaus doesn't even make the excuses that so many of us might make – the house is in a bit of a state and the pantry's a bit empty – maybe come around later in the week? No, none of that: Jesus was accepting of who Zacchaeus was, and Zaccheaus accepted Jesus into his home and into his life. Straight away.

There's that saying that I often go back to: Jesus meets us wherever we are, but he isn't content to let us remain there. And sure enough: Zaccheaus is changed by this encounter. The reading doesn't give us a sense of time, but there does seem to be some time passing between verses 7 and 8, because we have Zaccheaus welcoming Jesus gladly at the end of verse 6, and then in verse 8 he's standing up – which I think is probably after a meal together and almost certainly after a conversation.

But he stands up and he boldly declares "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

He recognises who Jesus is – he calls him "Lord". And he repents – he turns away from his wrongdoing, but he doesn't just turn away from it he makes restitution for it. And it also shows us how wealthy Zaccheaus was become – he could give away half his possessions and still have enough to give back to anyone he'd cheated (and there would have been a few!) four times over.

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

"There once was a man from Jericho called Zaccheaus... now the Hebrews, they were tall, but Zaccheaus, he was small, yet the Lord loved Zaccheaus better than them all"

I'm not sure "the Lord loved Zaccheaus *better than* them all" is theologically correct, he probably loved Zaccheaus *as much* as them all – but Jesus did choose Zaccheaus. And he did so for a reason – a reason for Zaccheaus, for all of those gathered on the streets of Jericho that day, and for us today.

Jesus noticed him, Jesus called to him, Jesus was welcomed by him, and Jesus let him know that he was saved. He let him know because of his faith and his willingness to change, he was made new.

Zacchaeus wasn't perfect. He certainly wasn't as 'good' as many of the people in the crowd. Just about everyone else despised him.

Lots of people are despised in the world today. Because of who they are – where they were born, the colour of their skin, their religion or their way of expressing their religion, their political affiliations, the jobs they do, their mental health issues and so on.

Jesus is reaching out to them. And Jesus has called us to reach out to them, too. When we became followers of Jesus, then we took on that mission, too. Go out and seek the Zacchaeuses of the world today. To talk with them, to walk with them, to eat with them. To tell them they are loved. To share with them the good news of the saviour who lived and died for them – and for us.

So often, though, we can end up being part of that crowd that says, "He's going to the house of that sinner!"

Zacchaeus was, of course, looking for Jesus on that day. He might not have known exactly who Jesus was or what he offered, but Zacchaeus knew that Jesus was someone worth climbing a tree to find out a bit more about.

And I think that reflects of many people in the world today, that they are curious about things of faith. I often drive past the church in North Turramurra, and they have a sign outside that simply says, "What if there's more?" I think that questions like that are things that people contemplate. Various surveys indicate that people say they're "spiritual but not religious".

Maybe people are not quite climbing trees to find out what the more might be yet, but when they do, let's be ready to invite them down and be prepared to share with them.

They might be people who we are uncomfortable with, they might have some ideas that don't quite match ours... but let's invite them into our midst anyway. Let's reach out the Zacchaeuses of the world.

In the end the Zacchaeus of the world are searching for something more. They may not realise that 'something more' is Jesus. Let's let them know that there is a God who loves them despite what they may have done in their lives. A God who will wipe away all of their wrongdoings and allowing them to begin anew.

We were all once lost. We were all once separated from God. But now, through the grace of Jesus, we are called to his banquet.

Today we are going to symbolically do that as we come to Holy Communion.

Jesus sought us out long ago, he has already said to us "Come down from that sycamore tree, for today I am coming to your house." All we had to do in response was to welcome him in.

Jesus said to [Zacchaeus] "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.

In the last verse of our gospel reading today, Jesus says "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." We were reminded a few weeks ago in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:1-10) that Jesus said "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in

heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Zaccheaus was one sinner who repented.

And despite who Zaccheaus was, what he'd done and what others thought of him, he turned to Jesus and was saved.

That's the offer that is there for all people today. No matter who we are. No matter what we've done. No matter what others think of us. We can all turn to Jesus, let him into our hearts and homes, and we can be changed and know his salvation in our lives.

Amen.