

CLEAR SINNER OR HIDDEN SAINT? (Lindfield 3rd November 2019)

LUKE 19:1-10

The story of Zacchaeus occurs only in Luke's Gospel and forms part of his travel stories as he heads towards Jerusalem for the final time. In 9:51 Jesus is in Galilee but he declares that he has to go to Jerusalem so for these 10 chapters that have provided our lectionary readings for many weeks, we have followed his journey. At least 8 times Luke records Jesus saying that he is heading to Jerusalem and when he finally arrives we read that he was teaching in the Temple every day (19:47).

The name Zacchaeus means "righteous" which provides a sense of irony. Our interpretation of the meaning of this story comes from what is NOT said in the narrative. We read into it what we assume to be the case based on a few facts we have at our disposal. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a "Chief Tax Collector" and that he was a "wealthy man".

We know that Tax Collectors were despised by the people because they were Jews who worked for the Romans, the occupying force, taking money from their own people and giving it to the enemy. As a "Chief" Tax Collector and being a wealthy man we assume that Zacchaeus became wealthy by ripping off his own people and maybe even the other Tax Collectors. The text doesn't say that of course.

His encounter with Jesus is very brief. Jesus asks him to climb down from the tree then he invites himself to his house for lunch. That's it. Some of the people grumble that he is eating with "sinners". Here Luke returns to one of his major themes. To describe the worst of all people, the most undesirable, unclean of the populace we come across the phrase, "tax collectors and sinners". Those of Zacchaeus occupation even earned their own special approbation. They were all lumped together as the no-hopers, those beyond even God's salvation. Luke constantly

portrays Jesus as the one who "welcomes sinners". In Chapter 15 there are 3 parables told one after the other of how we rejoice when something that was lost was found. The lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. After the story of the Prodigal Jesus declares that the son of man has come to seek and save that which was lost.

After these 2 sentences uttered by Jesus Zacchaeus defends himself. He says that he'll give half his possessions to the poor and that he'll repay fourfold the people he has cheated. That is a very big commitment. After only 2 sentences by Jesus? Jesus didn't accuse him of cheating. Jesus didn't tell him or even hint that he might repent and make generous restitution. Zacchaeus just seems to make this spontaneous gesture.

That's how we've always understood and interpreted the story. Such an interpretation is quite legitimate and true to the text. I remember preaching this story and titled the sermon something like "An Encounter with Jesus" or "Zacchaeus - a Changed Man".

It does seem a bit odd though doesn't it? Such repentance after, "Come down out of the tree" and "I must eat at your house". Hardly the typical "altar call". Did Zacchaeus think he had to get himself right with God before he could possibly allow Jesus to come to his house and partake of his hospitality? No hint of that.

It all comes down to how we interpret the original language. This is a classic case of the interplay between translation and interpretation.

The verbs are in the present tense. If we interpret them, as we usually do in this story, as being in the “futuristic present” we see Zacchaeus the sinner who repents and that henceforth he’ll make restitution.

If, however, we interpret them as being in the “progressive present tense” we get an entirely different understanding and on

which to me makes more sense. The people have made all sorts of assumptions about this man. How he became rich. How he is a traitor to his own people etc. But in this interpretation, and the language makes no distinction, we only have the context to help us decide, Zacchaeus is saying, “Lord, I always give half my money to the poor, and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy I always make a fourfold restitution”. The crowd had automatically demonised him but Jesus calls him “a Son of Abraham”.

The reason I like this second interpretation is that I find it more difficult to believe that “come down out of the tree” and “I must eat at your place today” would elicit such deep repentance. But many wealthy people do very generous things in secret.

For us in 2019 it also becomes a lesson about how we judge people on very superficial evidence. Read social media. People are demonised, bullied even persecuted for the most trivial of reasons. We are way too quick to rush to judgement. We would rather condemn someone that seek out the good in them. I know I do it far too often myself.

Look at the logic of the crowd here. Tax Collectors are traitors, ripping off their own people and getting rich as a result. Zacchaeus is a wealthy tax collector so he must be a traitor ripping off his own people and becoming rich at their expense. One reading of the text might seem to support that view.

Zacchaeus was the exception and Jesus knew it. How many times has Jesus called out so-called “good” people only to denounce their hypocrisy and then show how the “sinners” and the “enemies or gentiles” knew more about God and accepted God’s grace far more readily than the others.

Remember the faith of a Roman Soldier, a “good” Samaritan, a Samaritan woman at a well, and the list goes on.

So maybe this story is not about a sinner who shocks us by repenting but about the crowd that demonises a person it doesn’t like with false assumpt

So Zacchaeus does turn out to be true to his name. He is, in fact, the righteous one and Jesus knew it all the time. Jesus is once again turning our world upside down, confronting us with our assumptions about who is good and who is evil and demonstrating for us the tricks we play in our minds before we treat one another – one way or the other. Like the crowd murmuring about Zacchaeus. It is easy to be blinded by our prejudice of “those people” and find ourselves accusing the very person or persons we should be emulating.

AMEN
