

## ***Zacchaeus, the Son of Abraham***

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### **Behind the Text**

***He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way*** (Luke 19:1-4).

Today we have an event in Jesus' life, not a parable. Although the story has a parable-like nature – as though when the very activity of Jesus becomes, itself a parable for life!

We have talked about the structure of Luke on a number of occasions. You will recall that this central section, from chapters 9-19 are presented as being on a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem... through Samaria.

We've noted how that is more significant theologically than geographically because the Samaritans were longstanding ethnic and religious enemies of Jerusalem-based Judaism; that is to say temple-based Judaism.

The sinner theme is central to this whole section of ministry for Jesus. We began with Peter who falls down at Jesus' feet in chapter 5 saying, ***"Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"*** The sinful woman who washes Jesus' feet with her hair. The Pharisees say, ***If this man were a prophet, he would have known... this woman is a sinner*** (Luke 7).

When the Pharisees are grumbling, ***This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them***, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son who is a massive wastrel and sinner (Luke 15). We have the Pharisee and the tax collector, ***God be merciful to me a sinner*** (Luke 18). And then above all, at the very pinnacle of the sinner pile, we have the chief sinner, Zacchaeus (Luke 19).

This event is the pivot point in the story. It concludes Jesus' ministry outside of Jerusalem *and* begins the passion narrative, the story of the last week of Jesus life. From this point on in Luke it is about the last week of Jesus' life.

### **In the Text**

Zacchaeus lives in Jericho, the last city before you "go up" to Jerusalem. Did you know that Jericho is over 800 ft below sea level? Jerusalem is 3300 feet higher over 16 miles. It was an important custom station on the trade route to the east especially and Jericho had a profitable industry in the production and trade of balsam.



And that Jesus doing ministry throughout Samaria speaks volumes about the nature of the gospel and how the salvation Jesus brings is for *everyone*. In Acts the resurrected Jesus puts it this way to his bemused disciples: **...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth** (Acts 1:8b).

Zacchaeus is a “chief tax collector,” the only appearance of this word in Greek literature (αρχιτλωνης). It’s hard to know what a word that only occurs once in the world means (dictionaries are nothing more than looking at words in context and assigning a range of meanings).

Just to be clear, he assesses a toll on goods as they pass through this jurisdiction, extracts his fee, and passes the revenue along to the Romans. As a chief tax collector we can assume he has toll collectors under him and he was raking it in.



The portrayal of dear Zacchaeus is “gentle and humorous” as one describes the portrait. He is excited to see Jesus and joyful to receive him in his home. It is an absolutely lovely portrait of this diminutive man. He puts on a nice dinner for Jesus with many of his own circle of friends – other people who have no compunction about being in the home of this generally hated man.

***He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature*** (v 3).

The mention of Zacchaeus as “short in stature” is an allusion to a well-known feature of the story of the beginning of the monarchy and the selection of the first king by the prophet Samuel.

Of Saul it was said: ***There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else*** (1 Samuel 9:1-2). <sup>1</sup>

See my notes, but not just Saul but Eliab, Jesse’s oldest was tall and handsome. And the diminutive David isn’t even asked to the meeting that day.

So the mention of Zacchaeus’ stature is a clever allusion to the fact that, as we said last week, God doesn’t care what you look like on the outside (remember the Pharisee whose practice of religion was perfect from the look of things?), but only if the attitude of the heart is humble can we go down to our homes justified.

So we learn here that God loves the height challenged. I’m only 5’8”, but I identify as tall.

But then here it comes again!

***All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”***

We have the familiar motif the scandal it causes when Jesus goes into the house of the sinner. And we have noted in the past that nobody seems to mind that Jesus hangs out with sinners until he *eats* with them.<sup>2</sup>

Zacchaeus repents.

***Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (Luke 19:7-8).***

This is another example of the gentle and humorous treatment of Zacchaeus. He gets so enthusiastic in the moment that he is going to pay back four times what he defrauds them!

I’m no lawyer, but I think in order for something to be fraud there has to be intent to defraud. So no one is going to intentionally cheat someone and then refund it four-fold. He is quite elevated and its charming and slightly comical.

### **From the Text**

But you see, there is something about the Galilean prophet that has captivated the city. So great are the crowds that Zacchaeus has to resort to climbing a tree to see the man. And it is rumoured that this man is the Messiah.

All kinds of people are milling around in that crowd. Common folk, the hyper-religious authorities, like the chap who went up to the temple to pray that we talked about last week. There are brigands and political agitators, and the desperately poor, who feel the chaos of life closing over them like the waters of a flood. And Zacchaeus.

As Jesus surveys the crowd he “sees” everyone, for who they are and what they want. It’s dangerous to challenge power. Religious power is especially dangerous to challenge because the authorities think God is on their side. Most of the evil that has been done in the world has been done by people who think God in on their side.

The question is not, “Is God on my side?” The question is, “Are we on God’s side?”

What is the meaning of this story for us?

Is it about the repentance of Zacchaeus? He has the right attitude about mammon (money!). He receives Jesus enthusiastically. He seems to evince penance, although the text doesn’t really say he repents specifically, he makes reparations. And sure, we learn this from the story. We too should repent.

You know what I think? I think his life is about to be transformed! I think he becomes a committed follower of Jesus. And if we put the question as we did last week: ‘What happens the next day is the important thing.’ I think we would see a genuinely new man, our Zacchaeus. I would love to see how his life played out.

Imagine how his world shattered when he heard that Jesus had been crucified, just a week after he had been laughing and feasting at his table. And just imagine his amazement when the rumours started to reach Jericho that three days after his crucifixion his followers had seen him alive.

Is the point about the grumblers who took exception to Jesus’ association with this type of people. Is it about ***those who trusted in themselves and regarded others with contempt*** (Luke 18:9)?

I think we find the point exactly as Jesus tells it. This is the logion; do you see the pattern of presentation in these vignettes? We have the story/event and then a concluding logion by Jesus.

***Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9-10).***

Zacchaeus is not only the chief tax collector, but also the chief sinner of Luke (the *archi-telōnēs*, and *archi-hamartōlos*).

So when Jesus says, ***“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”***

What does this mean? Well, it is a perfectly clear mission statement by Jesus, on the very cusp of his suffering, about the purpose of his life and ministry. Jesus isn’t talking about saving these people from hell, he is the gentle shepherd calling them back into the fold of Israel. With justice, kindness and humility, as Micah 6:8 bade us last week to walk with God.

He is talking about saving the tax collector from his foolish life of money, the swindler from his greed, the prostitute from her shame, the plain old garden variety shopkeeper and farmer from the seemingly hopeless cycle of suffering that came their way.<sup>3</sup>

***I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (Ezekiel 34:16).***

The message is quite simple. If Zacchaeus, the chief-sinner, can be saved, anybody can.

The feast at Zacchaeus’ grand home builds in joy and merriment as Jesus dines with those “sinners” there in Jericho that day. Man, what a party!

And that list of characters (*dramatis personae* - for a colourful group they must have been, a rough lot) are feeling for the first time perhaps, that God “sees” them! It’s like they got their religion back, their value as human beings acknowledged by the Messiah Prophet!

They are at table in the kingdom of God with the beloved Son of God – not shut out in the darkness with those perfect religionists who stand outside grumbling about the sinners inside.

I’d have liked to be at that party. And when the merriment subsided later in the evening Jesus spoke. And taught them that they are beloved of God. ‘I came to seek you out and save you! I am your gentle shepherd who has come to heal your illnesses, vanquish your sins and lift you out of your sorrows.

The relevance of this passage to our lives today – to each and everyone of us? Jesus is still seeking you out. What I mean is that God is looking for you. This isn’t just a fluffy, pietistic trope. God seeks to save you. Jesus said it was why he came. Nothing has changed!

Remember last week we dreamt that the Pharisee and the tax collector would sidle up to one another, humble themselves before God and also before one another? We dreamt that they would leave the temple that day a truly reconciled people.

Here is my dream scenario for the week. The Pharisees crack the door out of their intense curiosity and slip in the back. Glances are exchanged as Jesus speaks, and each person there somehow knows that the time was finally right for a healing among the people, between the people, that in that warmly light courtyard a bondage of arrogance and pride was being broken. People “saw” each other and together they become the people of God again.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

<sup>1</sup> As you may recall, Saul was found to be wanting in his reign and Samuel had to go looking for a replacement. Even in God's story, things don't always seem to go quite according to plan. This is an interesting thing to reflect on and perhaps it teaches us to walk in faith, even when the plan seems to go awry.

In searching for a replacement, Samuel the old prophet is led to the family of Jesse in Bethlehem. When Samuel meets the oldest son Eliab he sees that he is tall and good looking, he thinks, ***Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord!***

And of course, wee David, the youngest and smallest of Jesse's sons, the one they don't even invite to the session with Saul, is the Lord's anointed.

***But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart"*** (1 Samuel 16:6-7).

<sup>2</sup> This points to the sacred nature of the table in our faith. How eating together is a sign of the table in the kingdom of God. There is this beautiful idea that of the sacred nature of the table. And that by breaking bread together we share communion with one another and with God.

We celebrate this in the Lord's Table when we gather for communion, a re-enactment of the Lord's last meal with his disciples. It is an important part of our life together as

The term ***Son of Man*** is a way of referring to himself.<sup>3</sup> What Jesus meant by this term has only been debated for 150 years (our own Dr. Rob Snow at Ambrose University wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Son of Man in Mark) – so it's a somewhat obscure way of self-reference. But don't you find it amazing that the Son of God calls himself Son of Man?