

THE LONELIEST MAN IN TOWN? LUKE 19:1-10

A face in the crowd! It is possible to be surrounded by people, yet be the loneliest person in town! Some of the loneliest people I have ever met, lived in the tower blocks in the Calders 25 years ago; there were more people per square yard than you would find almost anywhere else in the city, yet these were people who never saw their neighbours or anyone else from one day to the next; it was only if they made the effort to go out to meet people that their loneliness was overcome. There are more people than ever on the planet, but in our culture more people than ever suffer from being lonely, I suspect. The statistics tell us that by 2015, 50% of people in the UK will live alone; we can't equate living alone to being lonely, but it leaves it more open. The quality of our relationships is important; church is one place above all where, in the future, we can create a sense of community and that might become more and more significant in years to come.

Zaccheus has been described as the loneliest man in Jericho! He was the chief tax-collector in Jericho; that meant that he was in charge of other tax-collectors and he controlled their work; he took the taxes they collected and passed on to Romans their slice; he kept the rest for himself! Taxes were collected from travellers using the road, from merchants taking their camel-trains through the town, from local people moving their goods from Jericho to markets elsewhere. It was a good place to be a tax-collector! But all of this left him isolated. He was rich, but it was other people's money! He collected more than he needed for the Romans; he passed to them what they wanted and made himself rich on the money that he kept for himself. There were several reasons why he was hated: he worked for the Romans and was seen by his fellow-Jews as a collaborator with the invading army, with the enemy; he was greedy; he was a thief who stole from them and they could do nothing to stop him; they watched Zaccheus build his new house perhaps, out in the wealthy part of town, or add a conservatory, or a double garage and put two Rolls-Royces in it, and they knew that all this was being paid for by their money. Zaccheus had no social life!

Then he heard that Jesus was passing thru'. He was drawn by Jesus and to Jesus; he had probably had heard about Him, perhaps heard the stories that were going around about Jesus and something made him go. He wanted to see Jesus, but there was already a huge crowd gathered by the side of road and Zaccheus had two problems: first of all, he was small and stuck at the back of the crowd and couldn't see; and secondly, he was hated by everyone so no-one would let him through to the front. So he decided to climb a tree to see what was going on. He thought he'd be perfectly safe; it was a place from which he could see, but not be seen and so could watch the crowd, or listen to Jesus if he spoke, but no-one would know he was there. How wrong could he be!

"When Jesus..." (19:5) The people were astonished: what was Jesus doing going to have tea with 'this man!?' They knew what he was like, they knew the kind of man Zaccheus was, they knew his reputation; did Jesus not know? Would nobody tell Him? Zaccheus was astonished: it had been a long time since anyone had shown any kind of interest in him that was in anyway positive. Yes, it was his own house to which he was invited, but Jesus was insistent *"I must..." (19:5)* Jesus takes the initiative; Jesus creates the opportunity for something new to happen to Zaccheus and that's exactly what happens. We don't know if there was some other conversation or what happened in between, but the end of this encounter leaves Zaccheus a changed man: *"Here &..." (19:8)* It would be a long list of people he had cheated, or defrauded, but Zaccheus is a new man; he becomes the only rich person in the gospels about whom we are explicitly told that he chose a new lifestyle. He is a

different person now; we're not told what happened to him afterwards, perhaps he stayed in Jericho and stayed tax-collector, but if he did, he would be a different kind of tax-collector, a fair and honest and good man.

It wasn't really loneliness that was Zaccheus' problem; his loneliness was symptom of the real problem and that was the kind of man Zaccheus was. He had no friends because he was the wrong kind of person, greedy, a thief, ready to do anything to get more money. Even that wasn't the real problem; Zaccheus' lifestyle had driven a huge wedge between him and his God, he had wandered away from God, he had lost touch with God; he needed rescue, he needed salvation. That was Jesus' real gift to Zaccheus: of course, He showed him friendship first of all and that took Zaccheus completely by surprise; yes, Jesus challenged his attitudes to money; but most of all, Jesus spoke to Zaccheus words of salvation that explained to Zaccheus the love of God, and the forgiveness for sins. We have no record of that conversation, but all of that is held in the words with which the story ends: "*the Son of ...*" (19:10) In the midst of his loneliness and isolation, Jesus gave Zaccheus an invitation to friendship and fellowship with God! Zaccheus accepted that invitation and his life was changed.

'I heard the voice of Jesus say/come unto me and rest... I came to Jesus as I was... and he has made me glad.' (Hy 540 v.1) We come as we are; not always the way we would want to be! We have messy lives, we are lonely, we've made mistakes, we've neglected some things that we know should have been priorities but never were, our faith is not what it was or what it might be, our church attendance is more sporadic than we ever meant it to be, Bible reading and prayer are rare when once we were avid; all of this means we have drifted away from God, we have become lost. Then we come to Church, to worship, to communion, we come to express something of our relationship with God. How do we come? As we are! Indeed, Jesus invites us to come as we are. He went to Zaccheus' house *before* Zaccheus changed, as Zaccheus was, in all of his messy life. Don't be afraid; simply come as you are.

The glory of the gospel is that as we come to Jesus as we are, He changes us; He brings grace and love to bear on us; He saves us, He rescues us. The biggest problem we have is not our messy lives and all that we've described; the biggest problem is that all of this drives a wedge between us and God, that we have sinned against God. It is this that makes us 'lost people'. But "*the Son of ...*" (19:10) The very first sermon I ever preached, nearly 30 years ago, was on this story and the title I was given was 'the mission of Jesus' – here is why Jesus came, to save people like us, people who have got things wrong, who have messed things up, people like Zaccheus; Jesus came to rescue us from our sin and to bring us back to God; He did that when He died on the cross and rose again. The bread and wine of communion remind us that while we come to Jesus as we are, He gives us grace and forgiveness and He makes us new people. Our hearts are changed.

Loneliness is a terrible thing and it brings with it all kinds of other problems and feelings. People caught up in loneliness find it a dreadful place to be. Church can offer a sense of community and family for lonely people and can give a sense of belonging. But the Church can offer a much deeper sense of friendship and fellowship, with God, with the God of grace who loves us as we are and brings to us a greater sense of belonging to God; He brings with that other gifts too, the gifts of forgiveness, peace, hope and love.

One last thought: there is a tradition (though it has no Bible warrant!) that Matthew (a disciple and converted tax-collector) once said to Jesus "If you are ever down Jericho way, I wish you would do something to help a friend of mine, Zaccheus by name."

Zaccheus' name means 'pure' – was that his parents' prayer for Zaccheus that he would live up to that name in the way he lived his life. Were there people in background praying for Zaccheus, his friend Matthew perhaps, his mother and father, praying that Zaccheus' life would be better, concerned at the kind of man he'd become, longing that he was a new man? This is only speculation, but it is not unlikely! Are there people for whom you are praying like this? Are there people who would be praying this prayer for you? God answers these prayers.

We come as we are, we can come no other way! Come lonely perhaps, feeling lost, or full of regrets; or perhaps we come full of joy, full of life, vigour and energy; we come as we are to Church, to communion, to worship, to Jesus. Coming as we are, Jesus offers us grace, forgiveness, peace, hope, love – may our hearts be open to take these good things and leave this place today saying 'He has made me glad!'