

Introduction

I wonder if you watched the Royal Wedding earlier in the year.

Back in May this year Prince Harry married Meghan Markle in Windsor.

Police estimates were that 100 thousand people lined the route of their wedding procession.

Royal fans had been warned not to bring tents

they wouldn't be allowed to camp out along the route in the days before so the really determined watchers simply brought their sleeping bags and slept in the open air or slept sitting up right in camping chairs to mark their spot.

And they did this for 6 nights, 6 nights of sleeping out in the open to make sure they were at the front of the crowd.

It would have been so difficult for them to get that prime spot and what do they get in return?

A glimpse of the newly weds as they pass by in a carriage. A glimpse!

Nothing more, they don't get to meet them, they don't get a conversation, they get a few seconds of them being in view, and a chance to wave.

It's amazing the lengths people will go to when they want to meet someone important. It really can be quite difficult to do that

The Story

So today let me tell you about Zacchaeus, who wanted to meet someone important and how difficult it was for him.

Let's turn to Luke 19 and set the scene for what is going on.

We are near the end of Jesus public ministry and he has begun his journey towards the cross. One writer calls this 'the final piece of framing before Jesus approaches Jerusalem'¹

Jesus has reached Jericho,
it's a significant city,
some 20 miles or so from Jerusalem.

It's a historic city. Joshua had brought down the walls of Jericho in Old Testament times, but Jesus is not here for sight-seeing and instead seems to pass through the city v1

The crowds have heard of Jesus approach and have gathered to see him. Lining the path

Imagine the buzz that is in the air as people jostle for the best position. The noise of the crowd, the excitement, the anticipation

¹ Tom Wright – Luke for Everyone

Waiting to see if they can catch just a glimpse of Jesus,
waiting to see what Jesus might do or say in their town

The numbers in the crowd swell as people come out of their houses to see what all the fuss is about, and the crowd grows.

And there hopping around at the back we find a short man called Zacchaeus. His name means pure or righteous, a very Jewish name but not a very appropriate name for this particular man.

Being short is just his first difficulty in meeting Jesus, he can't see over the crowd and the crowd won't let him through. No-one is likely to make way for Zacchaeus because of his second difficulty

For Zacchaeus is a tax collector, which was more than enough reason for him to be unpopular but more than that he is a Chief tax collector, the only time this particular position is mentioned in the New Testament. He's actually the man that tax collectors report to!

Tax collectors were recruited by the Roman authorities to collect the tax from a local area. That means they could use their local knowledge to say who the wealthy people were in the community.

"Him over there, he might look scruffy, but he's got 50 sheep out on the hills, he's good for some extra tax money. "

They collected the Romans taxes and whatever extra they could extort for themselves they kept.

So really the tax collectors were collaborators with the enemy occupier. They paid the Romans for the opportunity to gather taxes in a specific area and Jericho was a particularly attractive prospect for a tax collector.

The city was situated on an important trade route and famous for the balm from its balsam trees. This made it an even better place for a tax collector. And better again for a chief tax collector.

So Zacchaeus' first difficulty with seeing Jesus is his height,
his second is his occupation and
his third difficulty is that he is rich.

Luke spells that he is rich in v2 even though it might have been safe to assume wealth from his occupation. There wouldn't be many poor tax collectors.

You could say it would be so difficult for Zacchaeus to meet Jesus that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle.

I use that illustration because these are Jesus own words in the chapter before our passage. Luke 18 v25 is a meeting which is important for the context of today's passage too. Jesus encounters the rich young ruler who keeps the commandments but goes away from Jesus sad because he is not willing to give up his riches.

This leads Jesus to say 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'

To which the listening crowd ask 'Who then can be saved?'

And Jesus replies 'What is impossible with men is possible with God'

But I feel like he could also have said watch me and see for yourself for now we have Jesus demonstrating the answer with the rich tax collector Zacchaeus.

To begin with it is Zacchaeus who is seeking v3,

seeking to see who Jesus was and when his various difficulties look like they will prevent him he runs ahead and climbs a tree.

Now we need to pause for a minute to appreciate just how absurd this is and just how desperate he must be

He's a grown man,
a senior figure in the community,
a rich man,
a chief tax collector and now he's running!

That's bad enough but next he's climbing a tree!

Can you imagine Theresa May running out of the Brexit debate (I bet she wishes she could) but running down the road and then climbing a tree.

It's not dignified, it's not the done thing for someone in authority

But Zacchaeus climbs that tree and waits to see Jesus.

And when Jesus reaches him, he looks up v5

He looks up at this little rich man,
this man despised by his own people
this dishonest, cheat of a man

And what does he say?

"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today"

I must,
it is necessary,
this is not a suggestion but an instruction.
A piece of Jesus divine mission

And so of course Zacchaeus jumps down straight away
and welcomes Jesus gladly and joyfully.

And now is everyone happy? Not a chance

V7 the people in the crowd being to grumble.
We've seen this complaint before in Luke's gospel.

The parables of the lost sheep,
the lost coin,
the lost son
are in response to these kinds of accusations.

What is Jesus doing with these people
shouldn't he be staying away from these kind of folk

What is he doing especially in eating with him –
the ultimate sign of social acceptance in that time
and then more than that staying at his house.

To the crowd it's like partnering with him in his crimes. They are disgusted.

It would be like Harry and Meghan stopping their carriage in that procession.
Jumping out and welcoming a known drug dealer to their wedding reception.

What would the rest of the crowd say, those that had camped out for 6 days to get a glimpse and then it's
the drug dealer that gets the attention?

You can imagine the grumbles and protests.

There is that strange way that people make themselves feel better by looking down on someone. By
saying I might not be anything special but at least I'm not that guy.

There's a massive rebuke in this passage for those of us who call ourselves Christian's but don't welcome
the sinner,
the modern equivalent of the tax collector,
the outsider,
the prisoner,
the drug addict,
the homeless guy.

Well, no matter that they might be looking down on Zacchaeus he is on the cusp of a dramatic conversion

Several months ago there was roadworks in my area.

They changed a junction so that you have to give way when approaching from a different side than you
had before

It's quite a change when you have become used to a particular way of driving that street and like anything
when we get set in our ways change is never easy.

But to help everyone there is a Huge red sign which reads

Changed Priorities Ahead

Changed Priorities Ahead.

Well what happens in this passage is much more than just changed priorities.

What happens to our friend Zacchaeus is a change of everything.

It is a conversion experience,
a rebirth
a new beginning

It's such an incredible change that no-one could have seen it coming

It's such a complete change that Zacchaeus will never be the same again

He takes Jesus home and presumably eats with him
then he stands up, ready to make his little speech v8

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.

One encounter with Jesus and Zacchaeus knows he has gone wrong and he's keen to fix it in a dramatic way.

He begins with giving away half of his possessions and then promising to pay back anyone he has defrauded four times over.

The law in Leviticus suggests he would be due to pay back one fifth extra, or you might interpret some of Exodus to suggest he should pay double but Zacchaeus voluntarily penalises himself to the full extent of the law and beyond. This is repentance in action.

Then it's Jesus turn to speak and he says v9

"today, salvation has come to this house"

It has happened today, it's not a long drawn out process but through his faith and repentance salvation has come today.

Zacchaeus finds salvation,
he finds deliverance,
he finds forgiveness for the things he has done wrong
he find the righteousness of his name for the first time.

This is the Good News that has been promised in Luke's gospel since chapter 1 (v 77.)
This is what it's all about.

Jesus then pronounces Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham.

Zacchaeus now belongs to Christ through faith. Jesus has previously used a similar term to describe a woman in Luke 13 as 'a daughter of Abraham'

Through this term Jesus is making clear that Zacchaeus salvation is based on his faith and not on his actions.

Paul describes it best in Galatians 3 when he writes

v9

‘those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith’

then v29

‘if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise’

Jesus is showing exactly who Zacchaeus is now. ‘a son of Abraham’ PAUSE

Then v10 we come to Jesus summing up what this has all been about, the key verse of this passage

‘the son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost’

‘the son of Man’ was the title Jesus used to refer to himself. It had links with the Old Testament prophecy but also stressed Jesus humanity.

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost

That’s the main point of this passage, it’s Jesus acting out this as his mission statement.

It’s the main point of this sermon,

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost

It’s could be taken as the key verse for the whole of Luke’s gospel

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost

You could argue that it’s the theme of the entire New Testament

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost.

That’s the Good News of the gospel.

So that was Zaccheaus...

but so what?

What now?

So what for me and so what for you?

Well like Zacchaeus so often we are lost but Jesus is still seeking.

Zacchaeus thought that he was doing the seeking but really it was Jesus taking the initiative all long.

I wonder if anyone here today is feeling a bit like Zacchaeus

Feeling that little bit curious about Jesus,

here like Zacchaeus to try and see who Jesus was

perhaps thinking that you can observe from up a tree from the distance, just looking on.

But Jesus call to Zacchaeus is direct and it's personal.

He walks straight to that tree looks up and calls his name. I'm surprised that Zacchaeus didn't just fall out that tree with the shock.

Jesus knows us by name, he knows me and he knows you.

And even if you think you are lost in the midst of the crowd he comes to you by name to show his love and to demonstrate your worth.

Jesus call to Zacchaeus is urgent

'come down immediately'

'I must stay today'

This is the time. Now. Sometimes we might make the mistake of thinking that we'll respond to that call when we are ready.

When we're less busy,
when we get things sorted out,
when we get every single one of our doubts answered.

But Jesus call is urgent, it's for now, today, and we would do well to come when Jesus calls us.

Finally Jesus call is to relationship

'I must stay at your house' he says

Jesus doesn't wade in saying

"Zacchaeus you are rotten,
you're a cheat and a thief
and if you don't change I'm not coming anywhere near you"

Jesus invites himself to his house first and then Zacchaeus responds to that call.

Some people won't answer Jesus call because they think they are not good enough and so they wait, thinking that one day they will be good enough.

But we can never be good enough on our own
we can never change ourselves in the way Jesus changes us.

So Jesus call to people like Zacchaeus, people like me and people like you
is personal,
it's urgent
and it's to a relationship.

And be sure that it is good news.

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost

Would you have camped out overnight to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he walked by,
or would you have climbed a tree to see him in the crowd.

Well you don't need to do those things, you can hear his call and respond today by trusting in Jesus with
faith and repentance just like Zaccheaus did.

Amen