

Bible Study - Luke 19.1-10

The Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem comes later in this chapter, so Jesus is on his way towards Jerusalem - towards a cheering crowd and, beyond that, towards the decisive moment. This incident, then, comes at a time when there might have been pressure to "play it safe" or even play to the crowd.

Verses 1 – 2

As Jesus is just passing through Jericho, among the crowd we catch sight of Zacchaeus, a tax collector when that role was even less popular than today – someone seen as selling out his people and their faith by doing the Romans' dirty work for them, and rich (everyone would assume) because he cheated people by keeping more than his fair share of the takings.

1. Who would be Zacchaeus' equivalent today, attracting the same level of public hatred and disgust?

Verses 3 – 4

The first surprise (in a story that is full of surprises) is that Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is, and it matters enough to him for him to invite the ridicule of the crowd, who surely picked on him as he shinned up the tree. This is more than passing curiosity – why?

2. Today, when determination to "see Jesus" or discover more about him seems unfashionable, what might motivate someone to risk ridicule and worse in order to get to know more about Jesus?

Verse 5

The next surprise is that Jesus neither joins the chorus of voices naming and shaming Zacchaeus for his sins, nor (as good Jewish teaching might have suggested) ignores him. He causes a scandal when he invites himself to Zacchaeus' home. By making himself Zacchaeus' guest, he turns the situation upside down.

3. How do you react when there's a chorus of voices denouncing (with or without good justification) someone's sins? Are there ways we should be turning these situations around?

Verses 6 – 7

Luke emphasises the speed of Zacchaeus' reaction as he climbs down and takes Jesus home; he also highlights his great joy at this turn of events, contrasting this with the grumbling of the crowd. Any decent spin doctor (or even disciple) might have warned Jesus this would not go down well.

4. How much are our reactions to crime and criminals a matter of going with the crowd? What about politicians', or even judges', reactions on policy issues or in sentencing?

Verse 8

Jesus' action produces a reaction in Zacchaeus; apparently without prompting or pressure from Jesus, he offers more than fair recompense to those he has defrauded. He gives something back to the community ... "he restores that he might be restored", not as a condition of Jesus coming to his house, but as a freely given response.

5. What is it in Jesus' actions that brings this response? Are there ways in which our responses to crime can look for that kind of response, even when really serious harm (rather than money) is involved? What kind of restoration is possible?

Verses 9 – 10

What happens in this brief story sums up what the gospel is about: "salvation has come to this house today". And Jesus adds that part of this salvation is that Zacchaeus the outcast is part of the community – not an easy thought for the crowd. This contact with a despised man, and the redemption it brings, are what Jesus came for.

6. What do you think "salvation" means here? Do the key parts of the story connect with your experiences? If this is what Jesus came for, what does that mean for the mission of the church today?

"No point is served in the life of human society, no truth is revealed about the justice of God, if release from past sin cannot be offered or restoration accomplished. There must be ways in which a future is offered that is free from the stain of the past. The story of Zacchaeus shows the repentant tax collector seeking to find such a way through the recompense of the victims of his greed. He gives half his money to the poor and paying back four times the amount of any sum he has taken to himself in his cheating days. While no doubt unable to trace and compensate all the people who may have suffered at his hands, he at least gives something back to the community at large – he restores that he might be restored." (From the 2007 General Assembly Report, 'What's the Alternative?')