

Sermon for Sunday 3rd November 2013

Reading: Luke 19.1-10

Sermon

My name is Zacchaeus. I am very good at my job. I live in a large house. I have plenty of money. I mix with important people. I dress well, am well-fed, and my family are provided for.

I am also despised, ridiculed, and ignored. You may wonder why, as on paper my life sounds so good. Well, there are two main reasons. Firstly I'm a tax collector – well, actually, I'm the chief tax collector for Jericho. And secondly, I'm not that tall.

I've had to live with the taunts about my height all my life. Children can be so cruel to each other, but those same taunts as an adult, with the added fear and loathing my people have for tax collectors, is wretched. People don't like paying taxes at the best of times, but they despise paying them to foreigners.

My fellow Jews, children of Abraham, the people of Yahweh, God's chosen, are a conquered race. For nearly a hundred years we have been under Roman rule. Generations have lived and died not knowing the freedom our ancestors knew. The ancient stories we learnt as children about us gaining freedom from Egypt, conquering this land, the shepherd King David defeating the giant Goliath and battling armies. All these stories feel like fairy tales as we stare down at the feet of Roman soldiers as they pass by.

We are subject to the peace of Rome. A peace that maintains order, and so long as the trade routes flow freely and the tax is collected, life goes on. If anything disturbs that order then the Legions come, and peace is restored through slaughter and destruction.

So I do my best to maintain the peace. I do my duty for the people of Jericho. I make sure we raise the tax that Rome demands and I pray my fellow tax collectors do the same throughout Judea so the peace of Rome is maintained. And for fulfilling this duty, for saving lives and keeping us safe, I am hated by my fellow Jews and tolerated by my Roman superiors. I am excluded from my synagogue, kept at arm's length by my town's leaders, hated by my neighbours, despised as a collaborator, and wherever I go I always just hear the insults.

Life with my Roman masters is not much better. Judea is not the plum posting for Romans and they are either striving to make a name for themselves and leave, or been sent here as punishment for some failing or indiscretion. They tolerate my presence at official functions and are only really interested in the taxes. And they make the same jokes my fellow Jews say behind my back, to my face.

So I console my situation by increasing my wealth, living well, and buying things of beauty. I can do nothing to make my neighbours like me, so while I keep Rome content I'll make the best of the life I lead and provide for my family. The people of Jericho hate me anyway, so they may as well pay that bit extra!

The only people I do socialise with are my fellow tax collectors. They hate me and covet after my job, but as long as I keep Rome happy my place is secure. So they bow and scrape, laugh at my jokes, buy me presents and try to gain my favour. My place is secure, but they are all replaceable.

It was at one of these parties that I first heard of this teacher. One of my men had brought along a guest, a relative of some kind, a fellow tax collector from the north.

He told this ridiculous story of a Rabbi, a teacher roaming the wilds of Galilee, telling stories of acceptance, and eating in the houses of tax collectors and other sinners. This man was healing people on the Sabbath, telling them that God had forgiven them, and arguing with the great and the good and telling them that they were the ones that were distant from God.

It was unbelievable. A tall tale. How could such a man be of God, if he ate with the ritually unclean and disagreed with our religious leaders? I couldn't believe it, but from time to time other stories about this teacher would be told at my table. Stories about seeking the lost, repentance, celebrating return, turning the other cheek, doing the right thing, not seeking reward, and of coming alongside those that are excluded from the community.

The stories were astounding, and the more stories I heard of him the angrier you saw our religious leaders get. The mention of his very name made their blood boil. If they heard the name Jesus they became agitated, and if someone spoke of Jesus of Nazareth screams and curses would soon follow.

Men who caused such anger within the hearts of leaders are not long for this world. But as long as he stayed up in Galilee he was tolerable. Prophets and preachers could rally the peasants as much as they liked, it kept them entertained, but they'd better keep away from our cities for fear of the Romans. Rome isn't very good at limited responses. Destroying a city required much less paperwork than arresting a single terrorist.

Because of this I was amazed when I heard that Jesus was going to pass through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. He must have lost his mind. If he kept acting and teaching as he did in Jerusalem, and especially at Passover when the city is full and near riot at the best of times, I feared for what might happen to him.

I wanted to see this man for myself, so I sent a servant to the northern gate to keep watch and to send word when Jesus was spotted. Word came back and I headed for the edge of town. The street was full of crowds, all trying to see Jesus for themselves. It was no use, I was trapped in a side street, my view blocked and I knew the response I would get if I tried to push through.

So I ran to the central square and climbed the sycamore tree there. Here I could see everything but remain hidden from everybody. I could see the crowd moving towards me and slowly in its centre was the man who must be Jesus. It took an age for them to get close to me. This man seemed happy to talk to everyone. He spent as long talking to scruffy children as he did well-groomed adults.

It was an amazing sight. This Jesus placated the powerful as they sought to gain status by inviting him to their homes, and warmly accepted the embraces of those who lived on our streets.

As the crowd drew nearer you could see the joy on the faces of those our town looked down on, and you could see the bewilderment on the faces of those that expected respect. It was a delight to watch. The social norms of Jericho upended. The poor feeling blessed, the rich confused and questioning.

I did wonder what would happen next. Would Jesus begin teaching?

Would one of our town's great minds try to debate him?

But just as I was pondering these possibilities I saw him look up at me. He gazed straight into my eyes, smiled, and said: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

He knew who I was! He knew my name, must have known I was a tax collector and hated by everyone around him. I would never have had the courage to invite him to my house, but he asked to be invited.

I scrambled out of the tree, nearly falling, and embraced him. I was overjoyed and couldn't wait to make the most of being in his company.

No sooner as I stepped back from embracing him did I hear the grumble of the crowd. They were once divided through how Jesus had accepted the excluded and removed himself from the petty rivalries of the powerful, but now they were united in their despising of me.

“He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

With those words my heart broke and in the next instant was overwhelmed. In that moment I truly knew who I was and who God dreamed I could be. My whole community despised me, rich and poor, saint and sinner, they all thought I was worthless; but Jesus denied that by asking to enter my home.

In that moment Jesus was no longer a Rabbi, a teacher, to me. I called him Lord, master, not just someone to listen to and influence my life, but the one to whom I gave my allegiance. In him I saw God, and I chose to live as God would wish me too.

So I declared I would give away half of what I had to the poor of our town, and promised to pay back four times the amount to anyone I'd cheated. My neighbours may hate me, but I now knew that God loved me. I would still collect the tax, but I would do it fairly and with mercy.

I then broke down in tears, tears of joy and grief for not living like this before, as I heard Jesus speak about me to the crowd:

“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.” **Amen**