

## Sermon Notes, Sunday 3 November 2019

Northern Beaches Anglican

21st Sunday After Pentecost Year C

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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 Luke 19:1-10

*responds generously to God's call.* Yet he is a *rich man*. The presence of Jesus makes possible what is humanly impossible: a wealthy man gets through the needle's eye! But not without some radical change.<sup>2</sup>

### What does all this mean for us?

*There was once a wild goose who went to live with some tame geese. He was committed to liberate them from their mediocre lives. The wild goose lived with the tame geese for a year, and he enjoyed the rich food, comfortable shelter and easy life. Each year, when the wild geese flew overhead, he would flutter his wings, prepare to join them but settle down again in the farmyard. Ten years passed and the wild goose became tame, and it forgot how to fly. (Soren Kierkegaard)* Consider the contrast between the response of the two men to Jesus. I see the Rich Man as living among the tame geese and Zacchaeus as responding to the higher call like the wild geese. Can you identify different times of your life when you have been more like the tame or the wild geese?

How would you feel if Jesus had invited Himself to your house? Some criticise Jesus' choice of Zacchaeus for hospitality. What criticisms could people make about you - as good reasons why Jesus shouldn't come? How would you stand your ground - what response would you make to the criticism?

What material things, worries and concerns hinder my life of discipleship? Do I own my possessions or do they own me?

In Brian Turner's painting (p.3) *Zacchaeus Prepares to Climb the Sycamore-Fig Tree*, Zacchaeus is trying to position himself to get a better view of Jesus. How can I position myself better to hear God speaking in my life and see his bigger picture?

### Some Further Reading on Luke 19:1-10

From the sermons of George Whitefield (one of the founders of Methodism): <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/whitefield/sermons.xxxvii.html>

The Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Essay on the Revised Common Lectionary: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20131028JJ.shtml>

Notes on the Gospel passages from the Lectionary, by Murdoch University's Rev'd Prof Bill Loader: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost24.htm>

### Notes

1. While there is disagreement about verse 8 here, most scholars prefer to read the present tense verbs *didomi* and *apodidomi* as futuristic "I will give", "I will pay" rather than as iterative or customary (the latter suggests "I already give" etc.). Yet Zacchaeus has not achieved salvation on his own, but through this encounter with Jesus as per vv 9-10. Readers of the KJV or The Message take note here.

2. Robert Karris, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p.710



Zacchaeus by Joel Whitehead.

Today's Gospel reading about Jesus and Zacchaeus gives us plenty to think about in terms of our discipleship and response to the call of Jesus in our lives.

As always, it's important to understand the **context** of the encounter as it is presented to us as readers of Luke's Gospel. It occurs during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem which Luke describes as part of his travel narrative (9:51-19:27). This has three sections (9:51-13:21; 13:22-17:10; 17:11-19:27), each commencing with a verse explicitly mentioning that Jesus is *on his way to Jerusalem*. In this narrative, Jesus is the supreme teacher of the disciples and others in the meaning of his way (see Acts 9:2; 18:26; 24:22 where Christianity is referred to as 'the Way'). As readers we walk with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and are captivated by his resolute presence and his instruction about discipleship. Today's Gospel reading is located in the third section (17:11-19:27).

The encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus is best understood alongside last week's lectionary reading from Luke 18:18-30 about the **rich ruler** and Jesus' illustration of the **camel and the needle's eye**. While the rich man is concerned with eternal life (hence his question at v.18 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'), Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem and is focused on teaching about the characteristics and cost of being a disciple.

Much has been written about this encounter with the Rich Ruler or Rich Man:

- **Julian Boulnois**, prominent Queensland psychiatrist and Christian writer once wrote that the man was “heavily over-invested emotionally in the pursuit of maintaining and servicing his material possessions and until he changed his priorities there was no room left for discipleship” [p.93 *And the walls Came Tumbling Down*, 1983]
- Referring to the Markan version of this encounter (Mark 10:17-31), priest and spiritual writer **Henri Nouwen** wrote “ ... the young man’s life was too complex ... he had too many things to worry about, too many affairs to take care of, he couldn’t let go of his concerns ... I feel sad because I wonder how different his life might have been had he been free to follow Jesus” [p.16 *The Road to Daybreak*, 1994]
- **John Painter**, formerly of St Mark’s College, Canberra, wrote that the man’s possessions functioned as an end in themselves. Despite his searching question, he couldn’t conceive of a future without these material things: “His possessions came first, exposing a conflict between the existential ultimate and the ontological ultimate” [p.15 *St Mark’s Review*, no. 173 Autumn 1998].

The rich man is too attached to his many possessions to leave everything and become a disciple. In the terms of his own original question, his attachments also prevent him from letting go of what has gone before and taking on the new life of faith necessary for eternal life.

Most scholars agree that Jesus’ reply to the rich man in Luke 18 is tailored specifically to the man himself. After all, he asks Jesus, “What must I do ...?” and Jesus “*looked at him*” (v 24)(Mark adds “*and loved him*” at v 21) and said “You lack one thing, go and sell what you own ...” Because Jesus could see into his heart, the call came to this man specifically as one that involved the giving up of his possessions in order to become a disciple. This is what he needed to do.

There are at least two key themes in this passage: the requirements for **eternal life** (the man’s question) and the requirements for **discipleship** (Jesus’ main focus in this section). The Christian faith is not just about the promise of a life to come. After all, this is a free gift by grace alone (Eph 2:8). It is also about the **promise of a new life here and now**. What do you and I need to do in order to accept that new life here and now and live it more effectively? The rich man was asking about the *ultimate reward* of eternal life. *But Jesus was offering new life here and now!* Yes, eternal life is a free gift, but a gift can be accepted or rejected, and if new life is to be accepted the old has to be cast off first. Anything that hinders discipleship holds back that new life that is in us.

Having this context in mind, the encounter between **Jesus and Zacchaeus** is all the more powerful. As Biblical scholar Robert Karris suggests, we do well to read the two passages together because the contrasting reactions of the two men to Jesus’ way teach us a lot about discipleship. Zacchaeus is a tax collector and wealthy -

probably as a result of his tax collecting activities. Like so many people, he had heard about Jesus and wanted to see what kind of person he was. Being vertically challenged, he had to climb a tree to see Him. Surrounded by crowds of people, it would have been easy for Jesus to miss Zacchaeus. But Jesus spots him and, it seems, sees something in Zacchaeus that even Zacchaeus did not recognise in himself. Jesus invites himself to supper. Jesus has not chosen those who “deserved” to have him in their homes - but chosen a tax collector. There were some grumbings about this inclusiveness (v 7).

The **enthusiasm** of Zacchaeus for Jesus is palpable and in stark contrast to the Rich Ruler’s lack of response. He was trying to see but couldn’t, so he ran ahead and climbed a tree (vv 3-4). We don’t know why Zacchaeus was so keen. Maybe he had heard about this Jesus or simply sensed something different about this visitor to the town. Possibly Zacchaeus was disillusioned with his wealth, his way of life, or with the religious or political system of which he was a part. Interestingly, in the Old Testament reading set in the lectionary for today the prophet Habakkuk (1:1-4; 2:1-4) sought higher ground as well, to be better placed to see and to hear the Lord: (2:1) “I will station myself on the rampart ... I will keep watch to see what he (the Lord) will say to me.” We all know the dangers of limited vision, both practically and metaphorically. If we don’t look around us,

we won’t see dangers and might get lost or injured. In a wider sense, we might miss opportunities, or worse still, begin to only see our own point of view and that of those close to us. Both Habakkuk and Zacchaeus refuse to be hemmed in by a limited vision. They seek the Lord’s presence and the renewal that a **Kingdom vision** offers.

Once Jesus speaks to Zacchaeus, his enthusiasm seems to grow. This is in contrast to the Rich Ruler’s reaction to Jesus’ words. Zacchaeus hurries down (v 6) and happily welcomes Jesus into his home. Even without being asked, Zacchaeus offers to give away his possessions to the poor.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the giving away of possessions is not specifically required of Zacchaeus. Salvation, for him, comes in opening his heart, home and life to Jesus.

Zacchaeus straddles two themes in Luke’s Gospel. On the one hand, he is one who



*Zacchaeus Prepares to Climb the Sycamore-Fig Tree, Brian Turner 2007*