

Zacchaeus: Do We See, Do We Hear?

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Preacher: Gavin McGrath

[0:00] A Scripture reading this morning is taken from Luke's Gospel, the 19th chapter, and the first 10 verses, the famous story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. If you're following, I think in the Pew Bible, it may be page 878. There are a number of Bibles available, but there's also the reading there on the order of service. Let's hear and read together in God's Word. Luke 19 from verse 1.

He, that is Jesus, entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich, and he was seeking to see who Jesus was. But on account of the crowd, he could not because he was small of stature. So, he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.

So, he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, he has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold. And Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

This is the Word of God, and to His name be the praise and the glory. Well, let me add my welcome to those from David. But before I start, I wonder if you would let me say at least two things. First, Janet, my wife, and I have only been coming to St. Columba's for like the last 10 or 11 months. And that has meant that I've not had the opportunity to introduce myself to most of you. So, and particularly those of you who are visiting, obviously I've never met you.

And so I think I know what might be going through most of your minds. Who is this guy? You know, that's a question I regularly ask myself from time to time. The second thing I want to say before we look at this passage from Luke's Gospel, I want to speak, I think it was, what, maybe two or three Sundays ago when Janice and I, and I think it was 14, 15 other people were formally welcomed as members of St. Columba's. I want to say to them, but also to any of you who might be yourself considering becoming members of St. Columba's, I'm pretty confident that there is absolutely no expectation that should you become a member that in two or three Sundays you'll be expected to preach. I mean, I think that's right. Well, let's, we really do need to pray together, so may I lead us please in prayer.

[3:42] Heavenly Father, we pray that your word would be our guide, your Holy Spirit would be our teacher, and you, Lord Jesus, your glory would be our supreme concern. Amen.

Well, the story of Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, it may be a familiar story to most of us. I mean, it is one of the greatest hits in most children's Bibles about a wee little man who has to climb up. I'm feeling very personally associated with that by being, I'd rather be there than here.

But for others of us, it might be a completely brand new story and a really weird one at that. But I think for at least two reasons, it will be helpful if we do go back to this story. The first is, I think, pretty obvious.

The second less so. Here's the first reason. Do remember that whatever might be familiar can still offer something new to you.

And I hope very much that will be the case this morning. Now, the second reason why I want to go to this story, and this is less obvious. The second reason why, whether you are familiar with the story or you're not, it has to do with what would we call it?

[5:16] Either an existential or an experiential kind of discomfort. It's that sense that, can't really put our finger on it, but something's not right with our experience going through life in these contemporary days.

Something is out of sync, and we just can't quite figure out what that might be. It's, well, look, let me quote an author whom I think puts his finger precisely on the problem I'm trying to describe. I'll try to read this section very carefully, because it's a very significant quote. Here is Edward Bear coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs. But sometimes he feels that there really is another way if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that, well, perhaps there isn't. Anyhow, here he is at the bottom and ready to be introduced to you, Winnie the Pooh. Last Sunday we had reference to Rousseau. [6 : 35] This Sunday we have reference to Winnie the Pooh. We are a full service ministry here at St. Columbus. But I wonder if you heard it. He's wondering, there must be a better way if only I could figure it out.

And if we can see and hear the story of Zacchaeus, however familiar it might be, or however novel it might be to us, I wonder if there's a way of seeing, another way in life that can bring to an end perhaps the bump, bump, bump of experience in your life. An experience that you may have wondered, will it ever cease? So come with me to the story of Zacchaeus who meets Jesus. And sticking with this idea of seeing and hearing, four things this morning.

First, see who is here. In other words, who are the actors in this dramatic story? Secondly, hear what is said. Thirdly, see where this takes place.

And fourthly, hear what this all means. Okay? Those four things. So first, see who is here. Who are the actors on stage in this dramatic story?

[7 : 53] Well, to start, of course, in verse 1 of chapter 19, is Jesus. He is, Luke tells us, passing through. He's passing through this very prominent city of Jericho, and he's going up in elevation about 29 kilometers towards the capital city, Jerusalem.

He's following a well-traveled road. And now, the thing to bear in mind, throughout Luke's gospel, there is a narrative trajectory, an arc in which Jesus is always focused on going to Jerusalem.

So after our passage in chapter 19, he actually does arrive in Jerusalem. And you might know this as his triumphal entry. Others of you might remember it as being sort of Palm Sunday.

But earlier in chapter 18, just before our passage, he had informed his closest followers, his disciples, that for him going to Jerusalem is going to involve his betrayal, his arrest, his suffering, his execution, but on the third day rise again.

And his followers did not understand it. But before he gets to Jerusalem, Jesus reaches this city of Jericho. But even before our passage, in the outskirts of the city, Jesus met a blind man, a blind man begging by the side of the road.

[9 : 19] And of course, you probably know the story. What is amazing to us, and I'm sure it was even more amazing to the people that were there, Jesus miraculously heals this blind man's sight but actually, if you look back with me at chapter 18, verse 38, Luke wants us to see something even more significant.

This blind man spiritually sees who Jesus is. Verse 38, Jesus, son of David, has messianic, Davidic kingship descent, all in that tone.

Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. Do you get it? A blind beggar sees who Jesus is in contrast to the rich ruler who physically could see but whose wealth blinded him from seeing and acknowledging Jesus.

and that astounds the crowd because their working assumption is it's the rich that have the capital, the leverage to understand. But this rich ruler turns away and that leaves them asking the question in chapter 18, verse 26, look, if the rich don't get it, who then can be saved?

And Jesus' answer in verse 27 is very important as we come to our story. What is impossible with men is possible with God.

[10 : 58] So the stage is set. There's Jesus. Now, enter stage right is Zacchaeus, chapter 19, verse 2. And Luke identifies him by name and that probably indicates that either his subsequent readers knew of Zacchaeus, but that's another story, or that he was well-known anyway.

And he was certainly well-known for his being notorious. Zacchaeus was not just simply a tax collector, he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

Now, most of you will understand, please don't think of him as a tax collector being comparable with someone who works for HMRC today, however frustrated you might be filling out your own taxes.

Zacchaeus was an Israelite who was working for the occupying power. So it's probably better to see him as a collaborator with Rome.

Think of him, then, as one who exercised a manipulative, coercive, and exploitive chokehold on many of those people in the crowd in Jericho.

[12:08] And Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. In other words, he's skimming off his profits from those who worked for him. He was a very big cheese and he was clearly despised in Jericho.

And there's a rich irony here because the name Zacchaeus in Hebrew-Aramaic, Zaki, well, that means, or can mean, innocent or pure.

Now, for reasons Luke does not explicitly provide, Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. I think that phrase is quite important for us to appreciate. He most likely wants to see Jesus out of curiosity. I don't know, he may have heard news about Jesus, perhaps the reports of the healing of the blind man that had been already taking place. So there's the stage, Jesus, Zacchaeus, but there's a third element of actors on the stage.

It's there in verse 7. And they play a very significant role, the crowd. Actually, they play a bigger role than we might first anticipate.

[13:20] Do you notice the crowd earlier kept the beggar from Jesus? And the crowd now seems to be blocking the view.

Do you know how it works in a crowd? You know how a crowd stands together and they kind of quietly block someone out. So there could be a double entendre there. He could not see Jesus because of the crowd.

And remember, this crowd would very much have included the very people whom Zacchaeus and his boys exploited, extorted, and bribed.

Their crowd was definitely not Team Zacchaeus. So that's who's on the stage. But now secondly, hear what is said. Verse 5.

When Jesus reaches the spot, the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus had climbed up to see Jesus. Jesus looked up and saw him. And here's the first thing said. Jesus called him by name.

[14:23] By name. Zacchaeus. Now, did Jesus know of Zacchaeus by reputation? Had he heard the crowd kind of muttering about this guy? Or was it that he supernaturally just knew who this man was?

Luke doesn't tell us. What he does say, what's more significant than how Jesus knew his name, is that he used his name. Because remember, to use a person's name is very special.

I mean, I don't mean when Alexa greets you in the morning or when those telephone marketers ring you up as if they are your best mate. No, this is very special. The author, David Brooks, describes using someone's name carefully as being other-centeredness.

You're actually taking the focus away from yourself and you're interested in another person.

Psychologists tell us that if the name is of another person, you use it well, that can be making a bridgehead to creating trust.

And studies show that hearing our name used by another affects us in a very positive way neurologically. And Jesus calls him by name, and get this, which not only Zacchaeus hears, but the crowd also hears.

[15:41] Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down for I must stay at your house today. Now, stop for a moment. There are three things here. First, a whole set of cultural conventions being played out, but in an unusual way.

There's a huge reversal. Jesus invites himself. Normally, it's the other way around. The host invites the guest. So something significant has happened just there.

Secondly, staying at your house is shorthand. It's a cultural shorthand for a very important acceptance, apparently in the ancient Near East, and even to this day, so I'm told, to be welcomed into another person's home for what was called table fellowship is hugely significant.

Because this would have been a public display. It's not a private supper party. This is a public display in which the host and the guest are publicly acknowledging one another. There is, if you will, a degree of intimacy.

And then thirdly, Jesus uses an intriguing expression. Do we hear it? I must stay at your house today. There is a necessity which is compelling Jesus.

[17:01] And we'll come back to that shortly. So, Zacchaeus happily and immediately comes down from the tree and receives Jesus, catch the phrase, joyfully. But not all are happy.

Let's not miss what happens as well in verse 7. All the people saw this, this social inclusion, this public interaction, and they grumbled.

He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. Again, verse 7. And the Greek word that Luke uses for grumble is a very strong verb. It suggests a very strong and harsh denunciation and disapproval.

The people, you see, are scandalized. And again, culturally, we may not necessarily appreciate this. Jesus is publicly associating himself with a notorious person.

And he is actually sharing in the shame of Zacchaeus. Now, as we keep going, Luke may be compressing his narrative somewhat because whether Jesus and Zacchaeus were talking on the way to Zacchaeus' house or at the end of the meal in sort of the dialogue that happens there, something else is said and we need to hear it.

[18:25] It's there in verse 8. Zacchaeus stands up and says, Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone, which he had, if I defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.

Now, first, Zacchaeus declares right then and there because the verbs are present tense. It's not, I intend to do this in the future. He's saying, no, right here and now I'm going to engage in this restitution.

See, Zacchaeus is following at the time the highest Jewish ethical standards.

The Jewish word was teshuva, which is a repentance that required not only contrition, saying I'm sorry, but it actually involved an active restitution on his part.

But here's the thing. Commentators tell us that Zacchaeus exceeds goes over the top in his act of repentance. Zacchaeus, and keep this in mind, Zacchaeus' practical act of repentance would have had economic implications in Jericho itself.

[19:41] Some of the very crowd who are probably listening to this meal would have heard him promise that. He is responding to those harmed by the very Roman imperial abusive system of which he was a chief participant.

But I think secondly, Zacchaeus is responding to Jesus himself. Jesus is the one who looked up the tree at him.

Jesus is the one who called him by name. Jesus is the one who initiated table fellowship and gave this warm inclusion when others in Jericho excluded.

In other words, the radical root cause of Zacchaeus' change and repentance was Jesus.

So, Jesus responds to Zacchaeus. Verse 9, today's salvation has come to this house since he is also a son of Abraham. Jesus affirms Zacchaeus' actions.

[20:50] In other words, Jesus is saying, yes, this guy has done complete teshuva, repentance. He's met the highest Jewish standards. But, Jesus goes further.

He publicly declares that Zacchaeus is to be included, not any more excluded. He, too, is of the seed of Abraham, the patriarch to whom Yahweh had promised countless dissentants.

And if we hear what's being said, if we hear it rightly, well, to quote Daryl Bach in his commentary, quote, just because one is a sinner does not cancel one's right.

To appeal to God's mercy. Thirdly, and this one, I really hope I'm not over-egging the custard here, see where this takes place. So, first, see who's on stage.

Secondly, hear what's said. But now, thirdly, see where this is taking place. Now, we'll need to go back to our Old Testament and you may remember that in the Old Testament, as Moses died, his successor, Joshua, is commanded to lead the people of Israel across the River Jordan into the Promised Land.

[22:12] And I know this is hugely complicated, and if you have any questions about why Israelites were told to conquer cities, Corey will answer those questions for you. And if we had time, we should be pleased to know that we don't, we could look at Judges chapters 4, 5, and 6, and how the people of Israel conquered Jericho.

But here's the thing, it was not through their military prowess at all. It was through the seeming weakness and foolishness of marching around the city six times, and on the seventh circuit, blowing trumpets, I mean, as you do.

And it was through that the walls of Jericho fell and the city was conquered. But, bear with me on this, we might overlook two other critical features of this bizarre Old Testament narrative.

First, if we had time, we'd look at the end of Joshua chapter 5, and there at that point, Joshua meets a man standing before him, and this man has a sword in his hand, and Joshua asks the man, are you for us or for our adversaries?

No, the man replied, but I am the commander of the Lord's army. Now I have come.

[23:40] And Joshua immediately falls down on his face and worships this man. And this man says to him, Joshua, take off your shoes, the ground on which you are standing is holy.

And that, for some of us, will ring bells to what earlier the angel of the Lord at the burning bush said to Moses, so who is this man whom Joshua meets?

Well, bear with me one more, we're almost finished. Secondly, you see, the Lord instructed Joshua as they're going around Jericho to have the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant.

Now I know you can think of Indiana Jones and that's okay, but it's this massive big box that symbolized to the Israelites the Lord's faithfulness and his sovereign power to protect them, even though they might be rebellious and idolatrous.

So the walls of Jericho fell due to Israel's reliance on the commander of the Lord's army and the Ark of the Covenant. Now, here's where I'm trying to go with this one.

[24:47] Where did Zacchaeus meet Jesus? Jericho. And at Jericho, whom did Zacchaeus meet?

With whom did Zacchaeus have table fellowship? To whom did he listen? He met Jesus, yes, but Jesus is the commander of the Lord's army.

Jesus is the Ark of the Covenant in the flesh, flesh, and it's through Jesus, this son of man, who breaks down the walls in Zacchaeus' life.

Now, fourthly and finally, we've seen who is on the stage, we've heard what they've said, we've seen where it has taken place, but finally, what does this all mean?

And the answer is immediately straightforward. It's verse 10, and Jesus is the one that tells you what this all means. For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

[25:57] There it is. That's what this story means. The son of man, that's an identifier that Jesus frequently used to describe both himself and his ministry.

I think it's actually a reference back to an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Daniel, where at one point, Daniel sees all of history, all the powers of this world brought before the Ancient of Days for judgment.

And just as it seems that the Ancient of Days is to render forth this judgment, it stops the judgment, and judgment is given to one like a son of man, and he is the one who has an everlasting kingdom. kingdom. And this son of man is the one that meets Zacchaeus, who calls him by name, who publicly includes him, and whose grace and mercy produce in Zacchaeus this extraordinary repentance.

Oh yes, the son of man will one day come back and judge all humanity, all of history, but at the moment, he comes to seek and save what is lost.

[27:11] And that's why he says to Zacchaeus, I must stay at your house today. So do we see and do we hear what's being said to us this morning?

Let me see if I can, as I end, which as you know, preachers, when they say when he's going to end, that means you've got a long way to go. But do we hear it?

Or have we lost confidence? Have we actually lost confidence that Jesus has come to seek and save the lost? Are there family members?

Is there a spouse? Are there close friends for whom you have been praying for years and years that Jesus would rescue, and yet it seems that there's been nothing happening?

Will I hold on to this assurance that Jesus you have come to seek and save the lost? Even today? Think of it as well.

[28:22] Are we willing, even this morning, are we willing to think of our own repentance in our life? I don't mean for some of us the repentance that we exercise when we first came to faith?

I mean the repentance of moment by moment, day by day. Or are there areas of our life that we're so scared to relinquish and so stubborn to relinquish that we're not interested in exploring repentance at all?

Or do we fall into the trap of thinking, well, okay, if I repent now, the Lord will love me even more? Do I actively seek the ministry of the Spirit to help me repent, prompt me to repent, and enable me to repent?

And let me ask another question, if I may. Have we, and I include myself in this, have we so spiritualized Christian discipleship as to make obedience to Christ only a private, personal, internal kind of thing?

I mean, from what commentators tell us, Luke seems to have a particular interest in how Jesus relates to both the rich and especially to the poor.

[29 : 50] But am I? Am I interested in that? Look, this story of Zacchaeus is more than about economic social justice, but it's not less. And, look, I for one have no idea what economics is about, although I'm told economists don't have any idea either.

And I, for one, am very reluctant to say this is the definitive Christian position on social justice. But look, if we are saying to ourselves, Jesus is Lord over every square centimeter of existence, justice, then surely there must be some form of public and social theology which includes some forms of justice.

But do we want that? Look, I ask these questions because for some of us, some of the time, it feels like we're bumping our heads. And we want a better way.

And figuratively, we want the bumping as we're going down the stairs to stop. could this be the way? But finally, and this is my real finality here, let me, can I just speak to maybe, maybe it's just a few this morning.

Could I ask you to dare to imagine the story is true? I mean, what if, just for a moment, what if there really is someone who willingly sees you and knows fully who you are?

[31 : 28] And what if the same one knows you so fully that he's calling your name, not to crush you with condemnation, but to welcome you, to include you into the intimacy, I'll use the word friendship, which a meal itself suggests.

What if the one who lowered the walls of Jericho so powerfully, graciously, has come to bring down the walls that are keeping you from him?

Imagine if there really is someone who not only seeks the lost, but actually can save the lost. What if he does this by calling you down from the tree because he himself is going up a particular tree? there's a poem by the 17th century English poet George Herbert in which he imaginatively pictures Jesus hanging on the cross, speaking to all those who are watching him die.

And one line in particular reads like this, O all ye who pass by, behold and see, man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree, the tree of life to all, but not for me, was ever grief like mine.

[32 : 54] See, the tree that Jesus climbed, no one else could climb, the tree of shame and substitutionary death, namely the Roman cross on which Jesus died. What if he did this?

This is what I'm asking you to at least imaginatively consider. What if he did this to save and rescue people and not to bring them into some inner mystical sense of well-being, but actually to restore them in relationship to God, Father, Son, and Spirit, and to restore people to a new community in preparation for a new creation.

And what if he wants is for a heartfelt trust and active repentance, not because trust and repentance earn his love and acceptance, but his love and acceptance initiate such repentance?

Could it be this morning? Possibly. This story from Luke's gospel is the precise means by which Jesus is right here and now seeking you so as to save and restore you.

Actually, to seek and save all of us. To stop this existential and experiential bumping, to bring in a new and better way. what if what if we don't have to climb any kind of tree to see Jesus because he has come down to us and calls us down to see and hear him.

[34 : 37] Let's pray together. Amen. Lord Jesus, in your kindness and mercy to us, we who often wander and are so confused and are so tired, you who are the son of man, you who are the seeker and savior, please work your gracious and yet also sovereign power to rescue the likes of us, to keep us going, and to bring in the fullness of your sovereign intention.

Amen. Amen. Amen.