

The sycamore-fig tree and me

Luke 19.1-10

The story of Zacchaeus from today's gospel reading takes place in Jericho. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. As he travelled this journey, there were crowds of people in many places who wanted to see Jesus, to hear him, to touch him and be touched by him, both physically and spiritually.

Zacchaeus wanted to know who Jesus was. He knew something of Jesus, we don't know what but enough to make him really want to know more.

We know who Zacchaeus was. He was a chief tax collector and a wealthy man. That is how he was described, by his occupation and his wealth. The two were not unrelated. Collecting money was an opportunity to make money. He was a chief tax collector so he had been at this task for some time and had it down to a fine art. Tax collectors were generally seen as being dishonest. We don't know whether Zacchaeus was dishonest or just very good at his job. Either way, he was rich; riches brought a degree of respect even if it was somewhat grudging.

We also know that he was short. This made it difficult for him to see Jesus, but he had determination.

He found a solution. He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree. Running and climbing were not generally expected of important men who ought to maintain a bit of dignity, but Zacchaeus did not care. They helped him to achieve his goal. He was used to being pro-active – get ahead of the crowd and keep ahead of them, whether in business or in the street. And he obviously knew the street and where to get a good vantage point.

Zacchaeus knew the direction that Jesus was going and he knew that way ahead in that direction there was a high spot. Never mind that it was up a tree. Getting to that high spot would get him what he wanted and needed – to get closer to Jesus.

Eventually Jesus came by the spot where Zacchaeus was waiting.

Now it is Jesus who is proactive. He does not wait for Zacchaeus to greet him or question him or strike up an acquaintanceship with him. Jesus is very direct.

He addresses Zacchaeus by name. He knew Zacchaeus before Zacchaeus knew him. There are some other stories like this. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well who said "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John 4.29)

There was also Nathanael whom Jesus saw under the fig tree. What did Nathanael say? . . .

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." (John 1:48-49)

People were constantly amazed that Jesus knew them before they knew Jesus. How does that resonate with us? I am constantly amazed that Jesus knows me so well, better than I know myself. I shouldn't be surprised but, often and repeatedly, I am.

Psalm 139 begins, "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me" (Ps 139:1) and goes on to tell how deeply and thoroughly God knows us. The psalms tell us so often how God knows us deeply from our very beginnings and to our utmost depths. How do we respond to that?

Jesus invites Zacchaeus to come to him ("come down") and he also says that he not only will but *must* come to Zacchaeus. (I must stay with you). Jesus' desire to be with Zacchaeus is urgent, joyful, invitational, and irresistible. Is that how we hear Jesus' invitation to us?

As we follow the story of Zacchaeus, we will look how we are or are not like Zacchaeus, and also how we are or are not like the sycamore-fig tree.

Zacchaeus responds to Jesus with joy. Not pride, not satisfaction, not trepidation. (*He hurried, came down, and received him joyfully*) Joyfully. Filled with joy. Filled! Is that how we respond to Jesus?

Those who saw Jesus invitation and Zacchaeus response were surprised and not pleasantly. They murmured; they grumbled. They thought Zacchaeus an unlikely choice for Jesus to make. Zacchaeus probably thought so too.

Zacchaeus did not mind inviting ridicule by climbing a tree; Jesus did not mind inviting ridicule by choosing and honouring Zacchaeus by eating at his house. The crowds judged both Zacchaeus and Jesus, one as a sinner, the other as choosing to associate with a sinner.

However, Jesus' choice was exactly what was needed. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus generosity by showing extravagant generosity himself towards his neighbours, perhaps the very ones who grumbled against him, not only did he make restitution for wrong but gave away half his wealth to those in need.

This is not a bargaining tool like the rich young man who asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Matt 19:16, Mark 10:17) It is a freely given generous response to the generous love of Jesus. We know how we are loved. How do we respond?

Why did Jesus choose Zacchaeus? Jesus called him *Son of Abraham*, signifying that he was loved and honoured as one of God’s own people. Sometimes we forget who we are. We are God’s loved, honoured people, his very own. Jesus helps Zacchaeus to remember who he is, to come back to who he is.

Calls to repentance are calls to turn back to who we truly are – to know ourselves and be ourselves as God’s own – honoured and loved. Can we respond joyfully to this call like Zacchaeus? We may need to make that right turn every day. We can take joy in our homecoming no matter how often we need to make it.

At the end of this story there is a great promise and challenge. Jesus declares, “Salvation has come to this house.” Zacchaeus’ salvation brings benefit to his family and his community. I’m sure that their lives were also transformed as a result of Zacchaeus transformation.

If we seek to follow and serve Jesus there is a further challenge. Jesus said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.” The crowds in the street did not see Zacchaeus as someone who was of great value, but lost and needing to be sought and saved. They judged him to be sinful, of no value, to be shunned.

How do we see others, not just those we like and admire but the others? The others. These “others” might be different for each of us. Whom do you judge to be of little value, hopelessly mired in wrong doing or wrong thinking, to be despised or shunned? Whom do I feel that way about? If I’m honest, I could make a list. Some days the list is longer than others.

But probably Jesus would not put any of those people on such a list. His list would more typically include the self-righteous and the hypocritical – all those who thought they were in the “good books” but who looked down on others.

Instead of judging like the crowds, we can joyfully receive Jesus’ invitation to new life.

And we can do something for others.

We can give the gifts of the sycamore-fig.

When you see illustrations of Zacchaeus up the tree he is often perched awkwardly in a lollipop tree that would fit easily in the sanctuary.

Well, sycamore-figs are not like that at all. They are big. They can grow to 20 metres tall and 6 metres wide. Zacchaeus could lie along a branch like a leopard, and there would be room for quite a few of his family and friends as well. The sycamore-fig tree gives timber, but chiefly shade and food. Its fruit is not as tasty as the regular fig but plentiful and freely available. It gives comfort and sustenance. That's a good start. Can we do that for others?

In this story, what did the sycamore-fig tree also have to give?

It gave access to Jesus.

Zacchaeus knew that was what he wanted, what he needed. But he also needed a little help. It was the positioning of the sycamore tree that brought him to Jesus. How are we positioned to bring others to Jesus? That's too big a question for today but one that we will ultimately and repeatedly grapple with. Of course there is no one big answer. Helping to bring people to Jesus can come from small things as well as big things. I'm sure you could list quite a few. That's probably a more useful list than the one of people we find hard to value. How would the two lists fit together?

As the sycamore tree brought the tax collector to Jesus, what could bring the other lost ones to know that they are loved, sought and saved? That is something that we can all reflect upon.

The story of Zacchaeus resonates with us in so many joyful ways. Jesus knows us by name – deeply and completely. We are his own people. We have personal access to Jesus and we can also help others to come to him and to know him. Like Zacchaeus we also can be filled with joy.

As it says in Isaiah 55: 12 *For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*