

Free to Change

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Readings:

Galatians 5:16-26

Psalm 32:1-5

Luke 19: 1-10

Zaccheus! If you ever went to Sunday school, or have taught in Sunday school, or had school assemblies with Bible stories in them, then you will be familiar with Zaccheus!

I've been involved in doing school assemblies for about 21 years now, and I don't know how many times I have told this story in schools ... he is the perfect Bible character to talk about to children because he is short!

Every child knows that frustration of being in a crowd where something exciting is happening - might not be anything out of the ordinary, a dog across the street, a shop window full of toys ... but the child can't see because of all those big people in the way - so they can relate to Zaccheus.

And children like Zaccheus's solution to the problem too. Not all children can climb trees ...but I guess most wish they could, and like the idea, so here he is the little man who can't see round the crowds when Jesus comes to town, and ends up shinning up a tree to get the best view of the lot.

Some of you who were here last week are feeling just a bit nervous now that we might start singing "Zaccheus was a very little man and a very little man was he" ... but we won't!

This morning children have gone to their groups, and we need to re-read the story of Zaccheus meeting Jesus from an adult perspective....

So just for now let's leave Zaccheus in the warm sun of Jericho (it's usually warm and sunny in Jericho and Brian will be only too pleased to tell you over coffee how it was when he was there last Sunday) ...

We'll leave Jericho and head in this direction ... away from the sun baked Judean desert to our cold northern climes.... colder and more northern than us even, and find ourselves in Edinburgh....the home of another man known for his financial wheeling and dealing:

Anybody recognise him?

This is Sir Fred Goodwin, also known as "Fred the Shred", and he became infamous as the high profile villain of the current banking crisis.

He trained as an accountant and moved into banking in 1995, joined the Royal Bank of Scotland in 1998 and became their chief executive in 2000. At that stage critics began to suggest he was a megalomaniac, obsessed by global expansion.

His passions outside RBS were motor sports and golf, and he enjoyed mixing with the rich and powerful – from Downing Street to the glamorous world of Formula One.

He was rewarded with many millions of pounds in salary, bonuses and shares and enjoyed the complete executive lifestyle.

After the Banking Crisis he has appeared before the Treasury select committee, and harsh criticism about the scale of his £700,000 a year pension together with his determination not to hand it back all combined to him being hounded by the paparazzi normally used to chasing pop stars and footballers, and he became the tabloid front page focus of public loathing, as ordinary people lost their jobs and their savings, and couldn't manage their mortgage payments.

Last March, Sir Fred's home in Edinburgh was vandalised by an anti-banking group who sent details of the attack in a message to a newspaper saying

“Fred Goodwin's house in Edinburgh was attacked this morning. We are angry that rich people, like him, are paying themselves a huge amount of money and living in luxury, while ordinary people are made unemployed, destitute and homeless. Bank bosses should be jailed. This is just the beginning.”

And I wondered, as I read the familiar passage from Luke's gospel about Jesus meeting Zaccheus, if Jesus had gone to Edinburgh last year and sought out Sir Fred Goodwin – and gone to tea with him,

- What would we have thought?
- What would the tabloids have said?
- What would Robert Peston have said about it on News at Ten?

The people of Jericho who knew Zaccheus - by name, by face, or by reputation, didn't know him as the little guy who climbed trees ... they knew he was the rich man who had made his fortune by squeezing the poor.

Zaccheus wasn't an accountant or a banker – he collected taxes for the Romans, and there is a phrase which crops up again and again in the gospels - “tax collectors and sinners” - it usually refers to the people Jesus was happy to spend time with, but make no mistake it wasn't a complimentary way of describing people.

The Roman Empire's taxes weren't collected by Civil Servants in offices sending out annual demands – their system was considerably more rough and ready. ... the Romans franchised out the local taxing rights to the highest bidder.

The successful bidder paid Rome the fee they demanded, then he needed to add a legitimate margin of profit. But how big a profit margin was legitimate?

The bigger the profit, the more hated the tax collector, and the more he was hated, the more he felt inclined to up his rates.... and as for the Romans – they really didn't care because they they'd got their guaranteed tax income already ...

And Zaccheus wasn't just a tax collector but the chief tax collector. He obviously made money from exploiting the tax payers....but he almost certainly made money from the tax collectors who worked under him as well ...a cut here and a percentage there....

Now I'm not suggesting that Zaccheus had the wealth of Sir Fred Goodwin, but he was seen as making his wealth by exploiting all the tax payers ... and he was collecting

taxes for the occupying forces don't forget ... and people whose country is occupied by a foreign power don't like collaborators.

So maybe Zaccheus was taking something of a risk to go out in the crowd at all. At work if there was trouble, he presumably could rely on the Roman security forces to keep him safe, but this was an unknown situation, an unruly crowd turning out to see Jesus of Nazareth, passing through town on his way to Jerusalem.

And if you have a bible open there....just take a look from a wider perspective ... the previous chapter, 18, includes a couple of parables – and one of them is about the Pharisee and the tax collector. That's 2 guys from the opposite ends of the moral spectrum....like the Parable of the Bishop and the crack addict....the people listening to Jesus telling the parable knew which was which, and who their sympathies lie with.

But Jesus said:

'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Then Jesus said "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

We so easily lose the impact of that if we've read it before....but try and imagine the shock of that parable ending, to the people listening to Jesus telling it for the very first time.

Then in chapter 18 Jesus blesses the children – who his own disciples had clearly seen as nothing but a nuisance ... and then Jesus meets an important person – at least that is how other people would have seen him:

The rich young ruler, who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him to go and sell everything he has and give to the poor, but it is a step too far for this man. It's an encounter that leaves me with all sorts of questions when I read it, but I don't want to get sidetracked by those ... just notice that here is a young man who has it all, wealth, education, good prospects, and social status ... but he can't bear the idea of changing his life in order to follow Jesus.

When Zaccheus meets with Jesus, there is no indication that Jesus asks him to give away his wealth – it's a spontaneous decision from a man who wants to change direction ... he's giving away half of what he owns, and repaying 400% of what he's extorted from others ... so it sounds like he is expecting quite a different standard of living after having had Jesus round.

Zaccheus wasn't going to follow Jesus to Jerusalem and wherever else he might go ... he was going to stay in Jericho where he'd become so unpopular, and presumably try to live the life of an honest tax collector – in a culture where the words "honest and tax collector" were a bit like us hearing "honest hedge fund manager" ... a very tall order, and a very real change.

It's a reminder to us as the Church of Jesus Christ that we far too easily react like the

people of Jericho, rather than like Jesus. There are almost certainly people out there in our community who pass the building regularly and think:

"I wish I was good enough to try church"?

Because people so often do think that they need to get themselves sorted before they can approach God, or that all of us have our lives sorted out and therefore they could never belong here.

When Zaccheus climbed the tree he was the deeply unpopular chief tax collector who had got rich at the expense of the poorer people - but after he had met with Jesus he was able to change his lifestyle, And he was able to change his lifestyle because he was different – and his priorities were different ... it was the result of the Holy Spirit at work changing him *because* he had responded to the love and acceptance of Jesus.

Luke's gospel doesn't tell us what happened to Zaccheus after he had his life turned round by meeting Jesus ... I would love to know:

- Did the people of Jericho believe he had changed?
- Did he carve out a career as the first ethical financier in the Roman Empire?
- Was he in Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus was crucified?

Whatever happened....meeting with Jesus was just the start of Zaccheus's new life.

If we had all day today....and probably most of the night too - and each of us shared with everybody else here about how we first met Jesus, there wouldn't be two identical stories.

For some of us we know we haven't actually encountered Jesus for ourselves yet....we're coming along to St Philip's and watching the crowds and hoping to catch a glimpse of this Jesus they all speak about (from the comfort of a nice folding chair rather than up a tree).

And for some of us we recall that first meeting as an amazing dramatic event which immediately impacted on life, and meant a complete change of everything. But my guess is that those folk are in the minority, and that for most of us here, that initial encounter with Jesus was a tentative step on the way of following him.

And as he called his followers then, and still calls his followers now, beginning to follow **is** just the beginning. The reading Vince read, which was a little snippet from a letter that St Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, was telling them how to continue in that journey....

Paul wrote – *"So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law."*

And any of us who have been following Jesus for some time know all about that ... that just because we are followers of Jesus we don't suddenly find ourselves being 100% holy people all the time ... speaking for myself I haven't even managed being 100% holy some of the time.

We become more and more aware of what we *should* be - loving, joyful, peaceable, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled ... and also more and more aware about how we really are ... and if I needed any reminding of this it was when I

was working on this yesterday - the phone kept ringing and I knew that my real, in here, response was impatience, not patience and kindness - (and in case you wonder it wasn't anyone here who phoned!)

And "Oh what now" at the phone call, is at one level quite trivial ... and we can read Paul's list of what our lives shouldn't be showing - including sexual immorality, debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; fits of rage, drunkenness, and orgies, and think "well certainly not" but if we compare our lives to the positive list, we have to ask ourselves how consistently we are living examples of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

But the good news is that the God, who totally forgives us when we ask him to, when we first encounter him, is always ready to forgive us when we fail him, as we do, and when we go wrong with the attributes off the negative list instead of nurturing the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in the service we read the first bit of Psalm 32, and it's a good reminder about how we can all find our relationship with God takes a dive because we do something wrong or maybe because we just stop consciously living by the Spirit. The good news is that we can sort it out: This is "the Message" version of Psalm 32 - it reads:

¹ *Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be — you get a fresh start, your slate's wiped clean.*

² *Count yourself lucky — God holds nothing against you and you're holding nothing back from him.*

³ *When I kept it all inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans.*

⁴ *The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up.*

⁵ *Then I let it all out; I said, "I'll make a clean breast of my failures to God." Suddenly the pressure was gone — my guilt dissolved, my sin disappeared.*

We began the service, as we always do, with confession, but sometimes when we dig into God's word, we realise that there is more we need to sort out.

Maybe despite all that has been said about Zaccheus - you still think you are too messed up for God to want to meet with you. There is a song, God of the Moon and stars, which Brian has played before, and I want to finish with it today. It's a very slightly adapted version and I found it with pictures on 'Youtube' yesterday, and I found it profoundly moving ... watch, listen ...and know that God offers his love to everyone, we just have to accept it.

'God of the moon and stars video'