

“Back to Church Sunday - Come as you are”

27 September 2009

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Leviticus 6:1 - 7

Psalm 89:1 - 2

Luke 19:1 - 10

Sermon

POSTCARDS HANDED OUT BEFORE SERMON

(Painting of Zacchaeus – © Sunhee Joo, Seoul, Korea)

“Come as you are” ... that was the invitation ... and if you are here for the first time, or even for the first time in a long time ... then you really are very welcome.

I wonder if you have ever experienced what it feels like to be on the 'outside'?

When I was at school I hated PE and Games lessons. If people were picking teams, I was always one of the last to be chosen ... I couldn't catch because I had a squint and couldn't work out where the ball was ... I was completely disinterested and hopeless at football ... I couldn't play cricket because I had such terrible hay fever I couldn't go on the school field in summer ... and five years of compulsory rugby meant weekly misery on Wednesdays.

I didn't fit in ... and not fitting in can be a very lonely experience.

There are all sorts of reasons why we may feel on the outside, as though we don't fit in. Broken relationships, unemployment, lack of a good education, family problems, poor health ... any of these things can make us feel 'different', and excluded from other people.

The story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is very well known ... or at least it used to be, when everyone remembered singing:

“Zacchaeus was a very little man, and a very little man was he”

at Sunday School. But that, for most of us, was a long time ago ... and in any case, there is much more to Zacchaeus than his diminutive size.

Zacchaeus didn't fit in. He was an outsider. He was despised because he what he did.

Tax Collectors have probably never been especially popular, but Zacchaeus was a Jew who collected taxes for the Romans ... and the Romans were an occupying army, and cruel at that. His position allowed him to corrupt the system for his own ends and to line his own pocket.

Zacchaeus was seen as a traitor to Israel. The Jewish leaders were particularly critical of those who followed this profession and they urged decent people to stay away. They openly criticized Jesus for having anything to do with them.

Tax Collectors extorted more than they should and kept a fair bit for themselves, so

they tended to be quite wealthy. Wealthy, but very unpopular! So Zacchaeus was hated for at least three reasons ... he took your money, he worked for the enemy, and he got rich by making his neighbours poor.

Sometimes people are excluded by their own actions ... because of the things they have done to hurt or upset others. Think of parents who have let down their children, or husbands who have let down their wives. Think of brothers and sisters who have fallen out and stopped speaking to one-another ... and people who know they have let down God.

They know they are guilty and their guilt keeps them locked in inside themselves.

The Old Testament Law made it clear that the wrong things we do ... what the Bible calls 'sin' ... has to be dealt with. There is a price to pay.

Leviticus chapter 6 says that "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the Lord by deceiving his neighbour ... " and goes on to talk about the need to make restitution ... paying back what we owe, and a little more besides. In order to put things right, a sacrifice has to be made.

Leviticus talks about making a guilt offering – a ram without defect – so that a priest can make atonement for him before God. Then the sinners will be forgiven for the things he did that made him guilty.

Atonement is one of those technical religious words, but actually it is quite easy to understand if we break it down into smaller bits: 'AT ONE MENT'. It is all about being put right with God and being AT ONE with him.

I wonder if some of you saw the film 'Atonement' which was a big hit in 2007?

In the film a young girl called Briony sees something she doesn't understand – a sexual encounter between her big sister Cecilia and a young man named Robbie - which led to her making a false accusation, which in turn results in Robbie going to jail.

Briony finds that she has started something which she now can't stop, and the repercussions roll on down the years. The lives of the key characters are changed for ever, and Briony cannot get away from her guilt. She spends the rest of her life trying to do good things to make atonement for what she has done.

Sometimes the things we have done can't be easily put right. If we have hurt someone, or cheated them, or treated them badly ... we can't always make that right. If we have let someone down or spoiled a relationship, it can be hard to start again. And what about if we have messed up our relationship with God?

Many people think that they are not good enough for God ... that if you want to come to God, you need to put your life right. But actually the opposite is true ... God doesn't expect us to get our lives sorted out ... he accepts us and welcomes us just as we are, and it is when we have come to God that he helps us to put our lives right.

Think about Zacchaeus ... a little man with a big problem. Zacchaeus enjoyed influence, status and great wealth but he knew there was something missing in his life. In terms of the world he was doing OK but he was not satisfied and yearned for more. He had money, but no friends. He was materially well off, but he was spiritually poor.

Zacchaeus had chosen the path of selfishness and greed, but he had discovered that it

led to loneliness and sorrow. He was a miserable creature, despised and an outcast. No-one wanted to invite Zacchaeus home to dinner.

But then Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was passing through Jericho, and he heard about the way Jesus had healed the sick and given sight to the blind ... how he had made the lame walk and touched lepers and made them clean ...

.. and a little spark of hope ignited in Zacchaeus' soul.

What if he could meet Jesus?

At the very least he could make sure that he got to see him?

So leaving dignity aside, Zacchaeus ran ahead of the pressing crowd and climbed a sycamore-fig tree so that he would be able to see Jesus when he passed by.

Take a look at the postcard.

If you go to Jericho today you can see the tree that Zacchaeus climbed. Well ... you can see a tree *like* the one that Zacchaeus climbed, which isn't quite the same thing. Anyway, it doesn't look much like the one in the picture. For one thing, it's bigger, and for another it stands alone ... a tall and dusty tree in a hot and dusty street, baking in the sun of the Judean desert.

I imagine that up in the branches Zacchaeus thought that he wouldn't be seen. He could see Jesus walk by, listen to him speak, perhaps even catch a miracle if he was lucky ... and then he could think about it ... what it would be like to be a follower of Jesus.

Not that that was likely, of course ... what would Jesus want with a man like Zacchaeus ... a collaborator, a thief, a liar and a cheat? What would Jesus want with him?

Surely Zacchaeus was one of those people who are not good enough – not holy enough – for God?

But Jesus can see a man up a tree and he takes the initiative. He knows this man and calls him by name. Jesus invites himself to share in the life of this outcast:

"Zacchaeus come down immediately, I must stay at your house today."

Of all the people in Jericho that day, Jesus declared that he wanted to stay in Zacchaeus' house. Not the houses of the rich, the powerful and the pious, but the house of the tax-collector ... a sinner!

Zacchaeus is accepted for who he is, but the crowd is not happy and they start to grumble about whom Jesus is going to have dinner with. But Zacchaeus stands up and repents.

Jesus' acceptance of Zacchaeus, his costly decision to befriend a disliked little man and enter his home, changed the heart of this lonely sinner. He promises to give 50% of his wealth to the poor and to make restitution with those he has cheated.

Zacchaeus' life is being transformed – Jesus is changing him.

To the amazement of the hearers Jesus declares that this tax collector, Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham! Zacchaeus was lost but now he is forgiven and made new. Zacchaeus' wealth and ego are no longer the centre of his world. Jesus is the centre.

Jesus asked Zacchaeus to come as he was. He didn't have to change first ... to get his life sorted out to make himself acceptable to Jesus. No, all that could come later. Jesus called him to come as he was.

Jesus asks us all to come as we are.

We are accepted. We are loved – just as we are.

Luke's account shows us the amazing depth of love and the warmth of welcome which Jesus extends to all people everywhere. Our background, our history, and our 'baggage' don't matter.

Jesus' welcome still includes those who are loathed and hated by others. It includes those who think they aren't good enough. It includes those who feel excluded and on the outside.

The wonderful truth is that there is nothing you could do which would make God love you more than he already does. He loves you passionately, whatever you are like, whatever you may have done. He loves you enough to send his own Son to die in your place.

Jesus invites every single one of us to "Come as you are." ... and if we will come, and meet with Jesus, and invite him into our lives .. then he will welcome us.

It doesn't end there, of course ... Jesus welcomes us 'Just as we are', but his love compels him to help us to change ... so that we might grow more like him. But that's for another day.