

Luke 19:1 to 10 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Today I'm preaching on Luke 19 the story of Zacchaeus the Jewish chief tax collector in Jericho, who famously climbed a sycamore tree.

Tax collectors in those days were rich because the population never knew how much tax the Romans wanted, so they were free to collect more than the Roman authorities required.

Tax collectors, who were normally from the community, were hated by fellow Jews because they were collaborating with, and collecting taxes for, the Romans.

In the case of Zacchaeus his wealth was enhanced because he collected money in Jericho which was in one of the richest areas in Palestine being located in the Jordan valley which may well have had the richest soil, possibly in the whole of the middle east, and plenty of water and sunshine.

The area was well known for its Balsam and Palm trees which grew in abundance and where there was a river crossing with lots of through traffic.

The Romans gave it world wide fame through trade in Balsam wood and dates, all of which made it an ideal place for tax collectors to get very wealthy.

In verse 3 we are told that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, which was probably like many other people in the crowd who were there, purely out of curiosity.

But Zacchaeus was a short man and he couldn't see over the crowds, and he dare not get too close, or be seen by the crowd, for fear of the people he had squeezed for taxes.

So Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree where Jesus was bound to walk by.

Now sycamore trees have fairly short trunks with lots of low strong branches and a huge canopy of leaves, an ideal tree for Zacchaeus to climb up, and to see Jesus, and yet not be seen.

However, when Jesus passed by the sycamore tree, Jesus looked up at him and said to him, "Hurry down, Zacchaeus, because I must stay in your house today."

From the way Jesus addresses Zacchaeus by name it's clear that Jesus knew precisely who he was, and probably his reputation as a tax collector as well.

At this point Jesus had given Zacchaeus a choice, he could either do as he was asked and climb down, or he could refuse and stay where he was.

And indeed that choice is open to everyone today, we too have a choice. Those who know about Jesus but who nevertheless ignore him, in effect have refused to get down from the tree.

Now Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed Jesus with great joy, and when the people saw it, we are told that they started grumbling.

Now the word grumbling probably covered a number of emotions, such as, jealousy, or envy, or possibly anger that Zacchaeus, of all people, should be chosen, and many people would now hate him even more than they did before.

But the crowd were also grumbling against Jesus for going to the house of Zacchaeus a sinner, because as yet they still didn't understand that the whole point of Jesus coming to earth was to save sinners, and what a better way to convert Zacchaeus than to be alone with him in his own house.

Picking on Zacchaeus was a natural thing for Jesus to do, because Jesus knew that he was a ready candidate for saving, which was demonstrated when Zacchaeus willingly came down from the tree.

Now when Zacchaeus had reached the ground he went up to Jesus, and he either fell prostrate, or he knelt down on the ground in front of him, because we are told that he stood up before speaking.

Zacchaeus was never disrespectful; he may initially have only been curious to know who Jesus was, or what he looked like, but he always respected him for what he stood for, and he demonstrated his respect with his humility when he knelt at Jesus' feet.

Now I'm sure that in the crowds there were people from all walks of life some better than others, so why did Jesus pick on Zacchaeus, what was so special about him that Jesus wanted to single him out, because you can be certain that it was for a very good reason that Jesus picked on him.

Now I know that I've already said that it was because he came to save sinners, but Jesus knew that we are all sinners, St Paul wrote "If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us".

So what was so different about Zacchaeus? It was because everybody knew him as a sinner, a thoroughly bad lot, and also as a very rich man, because everyone knew the tax man.

The other reason that Jesus picked on Zacchaeus was that he wanted to correct a feeling of hopelessness felt by some rich people, and even Peter, following his teaching a few days earlier where he mentioned the eye of a needle.

In the previous chapter 18 starting at verse 18, St Luke records Jesus telling the story of the rich man who wanted to achieve eternal life.

In that story a rich man asks Jesus how he was to achieve eternal life, and in effect Jesus said to him, "You know the commandments, obey them." and the rich man replied, "Ever since I was young, I have obeyed all the commandments."

When Jesus heard this, he said to the rich man. “There is still one more thing you need to do. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.”

But when the rich man heard this he became very sad because he was very rich, and didn't want to give his money away.

When Jesus saw that he was sad he said, “How hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of God! It is much harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

Now it would seem that Jesus' saying about the eye of a needle had caused considerable disquiet among all those with any money or possessions that heard it, because they replied, “Who then can be saved.”

Even the disciples had doubts now, because Peter also said, “Look! We've left our homes to follow you.”

But of course Peter was still relatively rich because he owned a fishing boat back home; we know that because when Jesus first called him he just dropped what he was doing and followed Jesus, he didn't have time to sell his possessions.

And of course in Peter's case he had a wife back home, who was presumably now running the fishing business, and living on the proceeds.

So that's why Zacchaeus was chosen, because he was very rich, and Jesus could use him to illustrate to the people how it is possible for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle, so let's see how he did it.

Of course in choosing Zacchaeus Jesus knew that deep down he was not a bad sort of man, and indeed that was confirmed early on when he decided to climb down from the tree, and then Jesus was further encouraged when he knelt at his feet.

And then came what Jesus was probably praying for, when Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord. “Listen sir! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay him back four times as much.”

Now it was Jesus' turn to welcome Zacchaeus with great joy; and Jesus said to him, “Salvation has come to this house today. For this man is also a descendant of Abraham.”

In calling him a descendant of Abraham Jesus was calling him righteous, as was Abraham righteous, not that he may have been a direct descendant Abraham, if you see what I mean, although of course he could have been that as well.

But much more importantly in telling Zacchaeus that he had found salvation, Jesus was telling him that through his repentance, and through the grace of God, he had passed through the eye of the needle.

In selecting Zacchaeus, Jesus had given the crowd the explanation of what he meant when he said, “It is much harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

Because now the people, the disciples and Peter now knew what Jesus meant, and they also knew what they had to do to inherit eternal life, which was to repent and turn to God. That's why Jesus chose Zacchaeus of all people from the large crowd of people around him.

Jesus was a master at exaggeration when making a valid point about the kingdom of heaven, and talking about huge animals going through eyes of needles, and the suggestion that we should give all our money away are two such cases.

But we mustn't overlook the huge step that Zacchaeus took, it changed his whole way of life, and the population of Jericho must have been amazed at his turn around.

And following his turn around I'm sure that he began to make real friends for the first time, which would have improved his quality of life, and indeed many people probably now affectionately referred to him as good old Zacc.

Finally we have verse 10, “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

The lost are those who are lost to God, that is, they are in the wrong place, like the lost coin, lost sheep and Zacchaeus.

The point at which Zacchaeus was found was when he repented and turned to God, and like most people he didn't realise that he was lost until after he was found.

As we sit let us pray.

Father God, you call us as you called Zacchaeus, and saved us in order to make us like your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Change us, day by day, by the work of your Holy Spirit, so that we may grow more like him in all that we think and say and do, to his glory.

Amen