

Bennochy church: 5th February 2017

Donald Trump is not small, in any way, but he is becoming a bit of a 'Zacchaeus figure'. Zacchaeus was not a well liked man, and for good reason. He was the chief tax collector in Jericho. It was a border town so would have had a customs station. It was wealthy. It was a fertile area of Judea, so tax income would have been extensive.. It seemed to be the practice that as well as collecting the taxes owed, the tax collector could take a sizable cut for himself. It was a bit like buying your patch from the Roman officials or, even Zacchaeus himself, as the chief tax collector. Being told how much you had to collect, and then on top of that, you were 'free' to collect your 'salary'. The Romans weren't concerned, as long as they got their money. It was a system open to abuse. Under Roman occupation, it would have been difficult, to take to the streets to protest, against the action of such tax collectors, as Zacchaeus. It did come to mind that one of Jesus disciples, Matthew, was a tax collector. I wonder how ethical he was?

It is only Luke tells us this great little story. The thing that interests me is why such a person would want to hear what Jesus had to say? In terms of their understanding wealth and processions, they are polar opposites. Sitting as a back cloth to this story is the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man. He was told, obeying the commands was not enough. For him to enter the Kingdom of God, he had to sell all he owed and

give it away to the poor and then follow Jesus. That story had obviously not yet filtered through to Jericho and the ears of Zacchaeus, or had it? I can't imagine for a moment that this momentous change in the life of Zacchaeus happened as a result of this one encounter. I have to believe that Zacchaeus already knew something about of Jesus and this challenge to him, in Jesus strong words about wealth and processions. That seems counter intuitive, but was maybe part of the dynamic that got Zacchaeus up the tree.

I suspect the crowd would have been hostile to Zacchaeus. I am wondering if he might, like President Trump, have had his own personal body guards. One thing's for sure they were not going to say to him, 'Zacchaeus, please come to the front of the crowd, so you can see Jesus'. I am not sure what language would have been used, probably x rated, but to see Jesus, his best bet was to climb a tree.

The most illuminating part of the story is the interactions described in verse 5 onwards. There are two dynamics going on here. The encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus and the reaction of the crowd. There is the expected. The crowd shows its displeasure. They started grumbling. *"Does Jesus not know the kind of guy Zacchaeus is?"* Of course he does. That is the point and the crowd don't get it. I wonder if it could have turned nasty? There was certainly tension in the air, as Jesus invites himself to the house of Zacchaeus. This was highly unusual for

pious Jew to invite himself to the home of an 'unclean' tax collector. What was also unexpected, was the welcome given by Zacchaeus. The world is turned upside down. A man who hoarded wealth is now willing to give half of his belonging to the poor and pay back four times to anyone he has cheated. In Jesus day, this response of restitution was radical and went way beyond what was required by the law.

This reaction, is in direct contrast to the rich man who obeyed the commands of God. But, the man who kept Gods commands and seen as righteous, goes away sad and Zacchaeus the greedy cheat, is offered salvation! Contrast the two stories.

This is a story not ultimately about Zacchaeus at all, but about how God acts. The mistakes of the past are forgiven, because genuine repentance is offered. This could only be seen, for Zacchaeus, in the giving away, of what was most precious to him. Otherwise it would not have mattered.

Zacchaeus could be any one of us. Change the details and we could be the person up the tree. More often than not, we are probably part of the grumbling crowd. Not in tune with God, and looking at things just from our perspective.

I like this idea of climbing a tree to get a different perspective on life. For Zacchaeus it was literally to see Jesus and to be able to hear what he had to say. But change the view and we see things differently. If you are walking deep in the forest, it is difficult to

see the way ahead, but climb a tree, and the way is no longer obscured, and maybe for the first time, we see the big picture of everything round about us. Our eyes open to new possibilities. Our perspective changes from where we are, focused on the here and now, to what might be in the future.

I believe God is saying to us, raise your heads to a future full of God's possibilities and not a view obscured by our problems. That is what faith is all about. To trust God in a new journey. As the people of God, we make that journey together.

The great leader of God's people, Moses, stood on a hilltop and looked out upon a land he would never enter, but in raising his head, he saw and acknowledged God's promise to his people, the gift of the promised land. It may be, we work for a vision that will not be fulfilled in our life time, but that is still part of the journey.

We don't know what happened to Zacchaeus. We must assume he kept his promises to Jesus and continued to live a life of generosity, instead of greed. Our encounter with God, in Jesus Christ, no matter what language you would use to describe it, offers us salvation. To use this image. We have climbed the tree, we have met Jesus and he has changed our lives for eternity. Amen.