

Wednesday Worship—People Jesus Met

26th August 2020

Zacchaeus

Opening prayers

Faithful God, we come, at the beginning of this service,
to lay down our burdens, to rest in your presence,
to receive your love, to discern your priorities,
to pray for those on our minds,
and to draw closer to your heart,
which breaks with all who suffer
and rejoices with all who are at peace.

All **Amen.**

Loving God, you are a great welcomer,
and you delight in drawing people to you,
seeking and saving those who are lost.
We pray that we too would be people of welcome,
opening our hearts and lives to those longing to be accepted.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

All **Amen.**

Introduction

Continuing our theme of 'People Jesus Met', today we find Zacchaeus up a tree, abandoning all dignity in his eagerness to see Jesus. The people around him weren't friendly and he was only a small man but Jesus saw him, called him, and offered him his hand. Thanks be to God!

Hymn: *Fill your hearts with joy and gladness*

Prayers with lighting of a candle

Sometimes we feel too small and insignificant to be noticed by Jesus.

All **Yet you, Lord, notice and value each one of us.**

Sometimes we can feel alone, lost or abandoned.

All **Yet you, Lord, never leave our side
but make your home with us.**

Lord of love and peace,
help us when we forget how much you love us,
and open our hearts to receive you.

All **Amen.**

1st Reading: Isaiah 1.10-18

Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

Prayer of response

Lord, help us to remember
that pious words and actions mean nothing
if we do not live according to your words
by doing good, defending the helpless,
and ensuring justice for all.

All **Amen.**

Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Prayer of response

Give us honest hearts, O God,
and send your kindly Spirit
to help us confess our sins
and bring us the peace of your forgiveness;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

All **Amen.**

2nd Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1.1-4, 11-12

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer of response

Lord, we thank you for your faithful people,
for those who hold fast, encourage us, console us and lift us up.
Give us faith to hold fast to you,
in both good times and bad.

All **Amen.**

3rd Reading: Luke 19.1-10

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Prayer of response

Forgive us, Lord,
when we are slow to see opportunities for change
in our lives and in the lives of others.
May we never turn away those you would welcome,
or turn aside from your welcome for us;
but grow in faith and trust and generosity
and walk more closely towards Jesus,
our friend and our guide.

All **Amen.**

Hymn: And can it be

Reflection

Hands up if, like me, the first thing you think of when you hear the name Zacchaeus is that song about him being a very little man.

It's a bit unfair, really, although he did perhaps bring it on himself by climbing a tree like a small boy in order to see Jesus.

Thinking about it, though, it's a wonderful thing to be so keen to see someone that you would abandon your dignity as an important local official just to catch a glimpse.

And Zacchaeus was indeed an important man.

The apostle Matthew, you may remember, was a tax collector, but Zacchaeus was a step up from that, as a chief tax collector.

But although he was important Zacchaeus wasn't liked.

Paying taxes is never a popular activity, but as a tax collector Zacchaeus was working for the Roman oppressors, collecting money for them from his fellow Jews, as the Romans contracted out the collection of taxes to locals.

As chief tax collector in the Jericho area Zacchaeus would have further subcontracted the work, no doubt adding extra income for himself.

Taxes were levied on many goods and services, as well as on individuals, and tax collectors added extra to make money for themselves, with no limit on how much they could charge.

This was a risky business run by disreputable people, some of whom profited greatly at the expense of their own people, so it's easy to see why people like Zacchaeus were regarded with widespread contempt.

As Zacchaeus was wealthy he must've been charging a lot more than he was required to collect.

But then three things happened: Zacchaeus was seen, welcomed and changed.

First, he was seen.

It can actually be quite hard to be seen.

Not physically, necessarily, but in the ways that really matter.

How often are we lonely in a big crowd because no one really sees us?

Our inner hopes, dreams, joys, hurts, fears and disappointments?

Who knows who we really are when nobody's watching and our defences are down?

It's easy to judge by appearances and write someone like Zacchaeus off as a lost cause, or to assume that someone's public appearance is all there is to them, but Jesus doesn't do that.

He looks behind all that and sees what's really going on under the fronts we put up and the images we project, and if we let him he will help, heal and save.

Second, Zacchaeus was welcomed.

In fact, Jesus invited himself to dinner but that wasn't the point.

In doing so Jesus was telling Zacchaeus, and all the people who hated him, and were complaining about him being there, that everyone is welcome.

No if, buts or maybes.

Anyone who wants to see Jesus can do, and anyone who's willing to let him in will find that God is generous beyond imagining.

Jesus didn't come with a list of all the good people he was interested in and wanted to invite to heaven.

Instead, he came to seek out and save the lost.

And that includes people who collaborate with the enemy and make money out of it.

And it includes the people we don't like or see as traitors or hopeless cases or not worth bothering with, scroungers, lazy, entitled or whatever our personal bugbear is.

We might find some of the people Jesus is prepared to hang out with surprising, and we might want to grumble like the crowd in the Gospel, but Jesus is known for spending time with all the wrong people.

Third, Zacchaeus was changed.

It wasn't that Jesus disregarded how this tax collector was living and allowed him to carry on exploiting others.

But by seeing and welcoming Zacchaeus Jesus made it possible for him to change, to see what he'd been doing wrong and be changed so much he wanted to put it right, with compensation on top.

It was at this point that salvation really came.

It was when Zacchaeus, who sounds like a practical man, saw the problem with his life and came up with a plan to change it.

Of course, it's easy to make promises and resolutions, only to abandon them when the first rush of enthusiasm is over.

But somehow I doubt this was the case for Zacchaeus.

His meeting with Jesus, his experience of being really seen and welcomed by him, with all his flaws, had affected him so deeply that nothing could be the same, and in any case a public declaration of what you're going to do is always a good motivator to stick to your promises. This, I think, is often how Jesus works.

Rather than beating people over the head with how bad they are, or telling them to go away until they've reformed, he sees, welcomes and inspires change.

People rarely change for the better because someone keeps shouting at them or tells them how bad they are.

Instead, people are more likely to change in a positive way if they're first understood, accepted and cared for, with full knowledge and understanding of both their good points and their flaws.

And God understands us more than anyone else ever can, sees more clearly than even the most insightful person, and is more generous, welcoming and able to transform us than any other power in the universe.

And, of course, this is not a story just about Zacchaeus.

It's a story about all of us who want to see Jesus but find something in the way.

It's a message of hope for those of us who know deep down that things need putting right in our lives but don't quite know how to start.

And it's an invitation to let ourselves be seen by Jesus, so that we can be welcomed and changed by the one who comes to see the ignored, welcome the outcast and save the lost.

Intercessions

In the name of Jesus,
who ate with Zacchaeus and changed his life,
let us pray.

O God, we pray for Christians across the world,
that together we may help people caught in life's ruts
to see Jesus over the heads of the crowd.
God of hope, you call us by name.

All **We are yours, help us to serve you.**

For countless communities suffering injustice,
for the victims of hunger, disease and neglect,
and especially those suffering from Covid-19,
and those misled by false information.

God of hope, you call us by name.

All **We are yours, help us to serve you.**

In our own small corners of the world, come as our friend,
and give comfort to the neighbours who have no peace,
the lonely, the lost, the anxious and the broken.

God of hope, you call us by name.

All **We are yours, help us to serve you.**

Come, God of life's fullness and care,
for the sick and the troubled,
for those who are dying,
for those who are mourning or afraid.
Grant them peace and courage in their time of need.

God of hope, you call us by name.

All **We are yours, help us to serve you.**

Trusting in the compassion of God,
we pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us.

All **Our Father, who art in heaven...**

Hymn: God of grace and God of glory

Closing prayers

In the bustle of our lives,
and the longing for importance,
help us, Jesus, to see you,
to meet and welcome you.
You call us as we are
and give us the quiet strength to become the people
we are meant to be.

As we make ready to turn our backs
on past shortcomings,
inspire us with the courage and confidence
to mould our tomorrows into new opportunities
to witness to your love.

To the glory of your name.

All **Amen.**

May God who seeks and saves,
who invites and welcomes,
who loves and cherishes,
be our strength today and every day,
and the blessing of God almighty,
Father, son and holy Spirit,
be with us all,
this day and always.

All **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord:
thanks be to God.
Blessing, honour and glory be yours,
here and everywhere,
now and forever.

All **Amen.**