

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 19: 1-10 ("Jesus and Zacchaeus")

He 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.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

We are marching in the light of God (CH 516)

When I needed a neighbour (CH 544)

And can it be that I should gain (CH 396)

I'm not ashamed to own my Lord (CH 645)

There is, we are told, no time like the present. Indeed, it could even be said that the present is the *only* time that there ever is, with the past lying behind us and the future yet to come. In this way we are, you might argue, “now people”, living in the moment (simply because we have *nowhere* else to be).

For today’s final jump into our Luke summer season, we come to see for ourselves that this gospel writer is himself a bit of a “now person”, viewing the coming of Jesus into human existence as the one, true, decisive moment of history:

- ✦ the birth of Jesus is depicted, not only as heralding what will emerge throughout his adult life, but also as “the dawn from on high” into *the here and now* of life;
- ✦ while other gospel writers suggest that in Jesus, the Kingdom of God “is close”, Luke uses his Christmas story to get much more direct with his readers: “*today*” is born the Saviour;
- ✦ similarly, as we heard near the start of our journey with Luke, Jesus declares that “*today*” the Old Testament prophecies about the Lord’s favour “*are*” fulfilled.

In this way we can see that there is an immediacy about Luke’s message of “now”, though he is in not too much of a rush to move us along. A few weeks back I noted that Mark’s gospel is all about rapid-fire events (“And then ... And then ... And then ...”). If we were to look for an equivalent phrase for Luke it would have to be the much more stately and steady, “and it came to pass”. That’s a phrase we rarely use in our day and age, but it probably equates to, “some time later,” or maybe it suggests, “after a while”. A full 50 times we find Luke telling us that, “it came to pass”, as his narrative moves on step by patient step, one foot in front of the other, all the way to Jerusalem and the climax of this great Jesus story.

The Holy City of Jerusalem is absolutely central to what Luke is trying to get across, because it is there that Jesus meets his destiny: a God-given destiny (at least, as Luke sees it) through which he will willingly give up his earthly life to fulfil the mission of God. Just like an ox, there will be a sacrifice, though not on the altar of the Temple, but on a municipal rubbish dump at Golgotha, famously “without the city walls”. Jesus, in the writing of Luke, always knows both that the Lord’s time will come and that it will come in the most terrible of ways.

According to the pen of Luke, Jesus is both human and *humane* in what he does and how he does it. He is certainly a “prophet”, and Luke uses this word to describe the way in which Jesus brings the people closer to the message of hope which comes to them from the God of their salvation. But the writer also goes much further, seeing Jesus not merely as a messenger but as a Saviour: “a Saviour who is Christ the Lord”. Remarkably, among Matthew, Mark and Luke, only Luke describes Jesus as “Saviour” - as the one who saves those who are lost. And that is precisely what we encounter in our story for today, as we are introduced to everyone’s favourite biblical tree-climber: Zacchaeus.

What is the story of Zacchaeus all about? In one sense it shows curiosity rewarded. The rich little tax collector was so keen to see what this special visitor actually looked like, that he climbed a nearby sycamore, only to get a very special invitation from Jesus himself. This story, however, also shows very clearly how someone with an open mind can welcome Jesus into their lives. That’s certainly what Luke tells us about Zacchaeus. But there is something a little more radical here as well because in the taxman we find a person who is ready to put his money where his mouth is. Rather than just calling himself a mere “follower” of this man from Nazareth, Zacchaeus proves how his meeting has firmly turned his crooked life right around:

"Look," he declares, "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."

Just a few short verses before this meeting, Luke brings his readers the achingly sad tale of the rich ruler - no doubt a respected citizen of some standing - who is challenged by this instruction of Jesus:

"Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

This person of wealth is downcast by what he hears, because he is so convinced that he has led a life that is close to the ancient requirements of The Law. Turn the page and you find a hated tax collector who shows by his actions that he really understands Jesus' path to salvation, humbly pledging half of his possessions and promising the restitution of any ill-gotten gains a full four times over.

Contrast these two men in their attitudes and their actions: idolatry versus freedom; sadness versus joy. Jesus knows that it takes a divine miracle to get the rich into the Kingdom of God, but right here in Zacchaeus the recipient of just such a miracle stands happily and humbly before his newfound Saviour.

And did you spot that word, "today" being used? It comes up twice on the lips of Jesus:

I must stay at your house today;

and then, far more significantly,

Today salvation has come to this house.

The immediacy of Luke shines through once more. Jesus doesn't give Zacchaeus some future promise of glory - he tells him that his life changes *now*, and for all time coming. That's God at work ... and that means present-day salvation for Zacchaeus.

With a humble tax collector on the one hand and with Jesus on the other, is it possible that Luke is giving his readers another of his stories all about "searching", and two men's approaches to "finding"? First look at Zacchaeus: he was desperate to catch even a glimpse of Jesus, just "to see who Jesus was", but his lack of height meant that some urgent action would be needed before it was too late. Throwing his dignity to one side he shinned up a tree like a 10-year-old, no doubt being laughed at by all those locals who had been well and truly taxed (and over-taxed!) by him across the years. Was he bothered? No, he was not, because Zacchaeus felt compelled ... by some vague curiosity? ... by his conscience?? ... *by God???* ... to take a look for himself. He searched ... and he found.

Now turn around and take a look at Jesus: here is someone who is also a seeker, perhaps even a seeker who knows another seeker when he sees one. And Luke goes so far as to tell us that, "the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost". This is his purpose, and here, *today*, we see that purpose worked out in the life of a tax collector. In seeking the one he so longed to encounter, Zacchaeus finds a weight lifted from his mind and a life turned right around. Seek ... and you *shall* find.

So there we are at the end of our journey, but *not* at the end because this is where you take over, seeking in your own time. We have stopped just before Holy Week at a pivotal point in Luke's gospel. Now that we know what Luke's gospel is about and how it expresses the reality of Jesus, take your copy, grab a pencil and a coffee, and work your way through from chapter 19 to the very end. I hope you enjoy your journey with Luke ... and, more importantly, with Jesus Christ, *the Saviour*. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord, help us to be good neighbours to all. Let us not walk by.

We pray for foodbanks across the UK and for all who donate to them.
Bless all their supporters and users. We ask that you guide our governments
to do all they can to make foodbanks unnecessary.

Bless those who work in mental health services.

We pray that under your guidance we become a society
where mental health is taken as seriously as bodily health.

We remember those who are cold and naked with no home to call their own.
Bless Shelter, Action Aid, Oxfam, Christian Aid and the many other charities
across the world who work tirelessly to provide clothing and shelter.

We think of the homeless on our own streets. Bless them and the police, social and
health workers who do their utmost to help them back on their feet.

Lord, we remember Afghanistan and countries like it where babies die because of
malnutrition and lack of medical facilities. Help their governments and ours to see
that this is not God's will. May they find ways to prevent it.

We ask these blessings in Jesus' name.

Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers the fun of singing in a choir:

As you will probably be aware, the last Sunday of this month (28th August at 6.30pm) will see our first post-lockdown "Come and Sing!" service at Gladsmuir. With both church organs in use and a great range of "big sing" hymns to cheer us and inspire, this act of worship should be a really great one to be part of. And, to make things even better, we will be having a retiring offering to benefit the work of Christian Aid. We hope for a great evening and a great outcome.

When we have organised similar services in the past one of the highlights has been the glory of having a big choir up front to lead our praise. With sopranos, altos, tenors and basses doing their stuff it sounds amazing.

When I was at primary school I was press-ganged into the choir, but soon discovered that I really enjoyed singing with others, as our voices came together to form something that was other-worldly in its sound. (Our parents may have had other ways of describing it, but what did they know?) As the years went by I sang in church choirs and truly loved the experience.

Choirs, as we all know, can be serious and well-drilled or they can be a bit more easy-going. Next Sunday we will be firmly at the lower end of that spectrum, as we'll be encouraging folk to gather at Gladsmuir for 5.30pm to run through a very easy anthem, a sung benediction and some very well known hymns. Everyone is most welcome to come along to our "Come and Sing Choir", as together we make "a joyful noise to the Lord". (Psalm 100:1)

If you can make it for 5.30pm on Sunday 28th, it will be great to have you with us!