

Luke 19:1-10.

3.11.19

*Little and large*

It is unlikely to have escaped your notice that last Thursday, October 31<sup>st</sup>, was Hallowe'en, with all the shenanigans that goes with that. What may have escaped your notice, however, was that last Thursday was also Reformation Day, an important day for our Protestant heritage. On October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517, a German monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg, knowing that there would be a good crowd there the following day being All Saints' day. In so doing Martin Luther kick-started the movement known as the Reformation and thus changed the world.

Our text this morning, the story of Zacchaeus the chief tax-collector, is a great text to follow Reformation Day. Indeed you could go to town using this story to explain what happened in the Reformation. Martin Luther's big concern, after all, was that people were like Zacchaeus in that they were being prevented from getting near Jesus. In their case they were being obstructed by the Roman Church which was making Jesus inaccessible. It had erected barriers that prevented access to God's Word, the Bible. Its priestly hierarchy with its monopoly and its mechanisms for absolving people of their sins had succeeded in distancing people from God - and the free, reconciling grace of God had been lost. Hence Luther's great cry, 'how can I get me a gracious God?' And the Reformation's great reply was that salvation was through the grace of Christ alone, received through faith, and resulting in a transformed life. And that could be said to be pretty much the story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus.

Consider it. Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem and now he enters Jericho, which in Jesus' day lay in the equivalent of Jerusalem's stock-broker belt. A green and fertile oasis in the desert, King Herod had a winter palace there, and doubtless many wealthy Jerusalem fat cats had weekend residences there. And Zacchaeus was one of those, not just a tax-collector but a chief tax-collector and described as very rich. Rich - but of course despised, for not only were tax-collectors lackeys for the occupying imperial forces of Rome, but they were notoriously corrupt, creaming off an extra tax margin for themselves. They were collaborators and corrupt collaborators to boot.

But then, along comes Jesus. Along comes grace on legs, grace with a human face, someone who prizes Zacchaeus despite who he is. Jesus enters his sinful, cheating life: he enters his home, he sits down at table with him, and Zacchaeus is changed. He repents of his cheating ways, resolved to turn his life around. And there, in a nutshell, is the Gospel that was rediscovered at the Reformation as Zacchaeus meets the grace of God embodied in Jesus Christ, freely forgiving and accepting him exactly as he is, and then prompting him to change and to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Now, I am so glad that this story is in the Gospels and I'll tell you why. You see, one of the great themes that runs through the Gospels, not least Luke, is Jesus' acceptance of the poor, the marginalised, society's off-cuts. These are people who are on the margins, people who are crushed by the system - the religious system, the taxation system, the social system which has excluded them and in which they have no investment whatsoever. And we like Jesus' focus on the poor, the deprived, the put-upon. We like this Jesus who is their advocate. But now along comes Zacchaeus and he is not one of them - far from it. He is part of the system that grinds them down. He is a cog in that ruthless crushing machine. And the problem is that even when Zacchaeus stops his cheating and resolves to change and to stop cheating people, that does not stop him from being an oppressor. Yes, Zacchaeus may have stopped adding his own grabby surplus to the taxes he collected, but even what he collected 'justly' and took only what was officially owed he was still part of an oppressive system. His 'fair' taxes still funded an occupying army with its imperial

adventures. His legally gotten gain still bank-rolled the privileges of the elite with their holiday homes in Jericho. Even a just tax-collector is still a pawn in an unjust game.

Zacchaeus, then, is trapped in the system – and yet I would maintain that nevertheless he did subvert and undermine it, not by his newfound honesty and integrity but by something else, namely the generous and extreme response he made to Christ's grace. Zacchaeus, we are told, was little, but his response to Jesus was large, as he promises to repay anyone he has defrauded four times over. Now, that goes way beyond what God's law required, way beyond justice. That is extreme. There is an open-handedness here, a generosity, an excess that goes far beyond what might be strictly required. And the system cannot handle this. The system doesn't work this way. It doesn't talk this language. The system is lean and mean and it is fractured and subverted by this extravagant, irresponsible gesture.

And this brings us to our place in this story. If we are honest, many of us here – most of us - are much closer to Zacchaeus than to the poor and the outcast. We, you and I, are part of the system whether we like it or not. Our lives are woven into an economic and social-political empire that bends the world to its will and that plays havoc with justice. Every indication today is that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and our life-styles contribute to environmental devastation. We are woven into that system inextricably. And it is so difficult to disinvest from it. Even when, like Zacchaeus, we try to live with honesty and integrity, we are still cogs in a machine that keeps a self-destructive world divided and unequal.

Yet nevertheless we can take heart this morning from Zacchaeus and learn from him. Zacchaeus subverted the unjust system not by living a life of honesty and integrity – important though that was – but by a generous and extravagant gesture that went far beyond what was reasonably expected of him. He met Jesus' generous grace towards him with an excessive response. And there are any number of ways that we can express this kind of excess, this generosity of spirit in our personal relations and in our giving and in the stewarding of our resources. And as Jesus met Zacchaeus as they shared a meal, prompting Zacchaeus to change, so today he meets us at this table, summoning us to an extravagant and excessive response.

Just a few verses before this passage, in the previous chapter, Jesus makes his famous observation that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's Kingdom. The Welsh poet R S Thomas has a beautiful poem which includes the line, 'Maybe I will slip through the eye of the needle on which the saved are threaded.' Zacchaeus slipped through the eye of the needle not because he was small but because he made a large response to God's grace in Jesus, thus defying the system. In imitating Zacchaeus, maybe we will slip through too. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
we praise you holy name.  
We join today with all creation,  
with all the angelic host,  
with all you people on earth  
and in your nearer presence in heaven,  
and we worship you.  
We bless you that you have come to us in Jesus Christ,  
breaking down the barriers and divisions that keep us from you.  
We rejoice that you come to each of us  
and you call us by name,  
and you offer to come to us,  
and you break bread with us  
and invite us to make a new start and to change.

O God, forgive us that we are so reluctant.  
Forgive us that we resist change and newness.  
Forgive us that we cling on to the old world  
And to old ways that have no place in your realm.  
Hear as we acknowledge and confess to you our sins,  
saying together...

O God assure us of your grace in Jesus Christ.  
Help us to receive it by faith.  
And grant that we may bear the fruit of repentance  
And changed lives.  
For we pray in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ  
Amen.