

Sermon preached at St. John the Baptist, Devizes, 30th October 2016  
(4th before Advent)

The lovely story, of Christ's redemption of Zaccheus the wealthy chief tax collector, unique to Luke, is one of my favourites.

Jericho was a fine, prosperous city and commanded both the approach to Jerusalem and the crossings of the river which gave access to the lands east of the River Jordan. This meant a lot of traffic through it on which tolls would have to be paid. All this made Jericho one of the greatest taxation centres in Palestine.

The Romans would assess a district and fix a sum. The appointed tax collector would pocket any tax he managed to collect in excess of his quota.

Tax collectors were hated and despised. They were quislings – traitors working for the occupying power; and most of them were rapacious crooks. They were socially ostracised and barred from the synagogue. A wealthy *chief* tax collector would incur the maximum opprobrium.

Jesus' approach to Zaccheus was characteristic of his disregard for the conventions, the rigid boundaries of Jewish society.

We do not know what prompted Zaccheus to the extremely undignified procedure he used to get a glimpse of Jesus. Adult Jews did not run and they certainly did not climb trees. Simple curiosity could hardly be the motive. It was a more powerful urge than that. Perhaps he was sick at heart: tired of his job, tired of being shunned, tired of being lonely; no satisfaction from all his wealth, which was fool's gold and certainly couldn't buy him respect. This man Jesus had a reputation for accepting tax collectors – maybe Zaccheus knew of Levi -- and ... who knows? Maybe... maybe.

And of course this extraordinary man exceeded all his hopes. "Zaccheus, make haste and come down. I must abide at your house today". Our Lord did not say "Come down, Zaccheus, I want a word with you". There was no finger wagging, no remonstrance, no demand for repentance, no promise of forgiveness subject to terms and conditions. Just a request for a night's hospitality.

Zaccheus received him joyfully. The bystanders, not surprisingly, murmured. They found it hard to accept the Lord's attitude to a notorious sinner. But Zaccheus immediately shows that the Lord has indeed captivated him. Half of his goods would go to charity; with the rest he would make restitution beyond what the law prescribed. The Lord then sets his seal on the denouement. Salvation has come, not only to Zaccheus but also to his whole household. The lost has been found.

I quote from the late Canon Vanstone: "the story of Jesus and Zaccheus is a vivid and powerful illustration of the meaning of Paul's statement 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation' ... In the story we read of Jesus 'not counting against him' Zaccheus' trespasses: he made no mention of them. He treated them as if they did not exist and simply asked him for his hospitality as a man might ask his friend. Jesus healed or won back this man whose shameful behaviour had estranged him from God and man; and he did so by treating him as still 'one of us', as still a friend of whom a kindness might be asked and received."

Now fast forward some weeks. Zaccheus comes across an old companion whom he hasn't seen for months and immediately tells him of this wonderful man, Jesus, who had done so much for him. "Jesus of Nazareth? Haven't you heard? He's dead. The Romans crucified him. He was seen by those in power as trouble maker. Some of his followers called him the Messiah. Impossible, of course. A crucified Messiah is a contradiction in terms. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news".

Zaccheus must have seen this as an appalling catastrophe, with many others who had met and had come to love Jesus. They had not heard of the Resurrection, or had not believed in it. They may well have felt God-forsaken.

The point of crucifixion was not just to torture the victim to death, but humiliate him, to display him as a complete loser. Many orthodox Jews saw him that way and could not believe that his remaining followers put it about that he was the long awaited Messiah. This was paradox too far. A crucified Messiah an impossibility. Devout Pharisees set out to persecute these perverse believers. One of the most vigorous was one Saul, of Tarsus. He was with what might be called a terrorist snatch squad to seize Christians in Damascus and take them back to the High Priests in Jerusalem, when the Risen Lord arrested him and made him a job offer he could not refuse. From then on he was obsessed by Christ, and he was inspired to undertake the transformation of Christianity, in Rowan Williams words.

I can sense that some of you are muttering "ho ho, here goes John Stott again. He starts a sermon about Zaccheus and finishes up with Paul". But it's not just about Zaccheus, it's about Jesus and his healing, his rescuing, of Zaccheus. The Lord has manifested the power of love: manifested his healing power, by restoring to Zaccheus his true self, the self that gives. But what about the cross? Paul helped to show the healing power of the cross demonstrated in John's Gospel when the Lord himself proclaims — "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life". The reference is to the account in the book of Numbers of the plague of serpents brought upon the Israelites because of their grumbling on their way to the Promised Land about the food Moses laid on. Many died from snake bites and Moses sought the help of God, who told him to erect a pole and fasten to it a brass serpent: all who looked on it would be healed. Christ came into his glory when he was lifted up, totally powerless. Those who contemplate Christ crucified, a naked wretch humiliated in His ultimate self-giving, and have faith in Him, will be healed, healed of their egocentricity.

Paul knew so well this healing power: he writes to the Galatians "My faith in the flesh is in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me". Our faith summed up beautifully in just a few words.

What then do we do. We can bear in mind Paul's admonition to the Phillipians. "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.". We get it quite wrong if we take this as meaning that Christ divests himself of the Godhead, of all that makes him God of God, light of light, very God of very God. On the contrary, in making himself nothing, emptying himself of ego, in

his utter surrender of himself in love and loving service Jesus discloses and lays bare the ground of God's being and of human being as ... love.

I leave the last word with Paul: "The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore". Amen