

Sermon (#15)

Sunday 3rd November 2019. Gospel Reading: Luke 19:1-10.

Sufficiently Silent, Sufficiently Free

It was, I think, Thomas Jefferson who said ‘to compel a man to furnish funds for the propagation of ideas he disbelieves and abhors is sinful and tyrannical’. Well, that could be a useful summary of the attitude that most first century Palestinians had to the taxes that were imposed upon them by their Roman overlords. The Jews resented taxation by the Roman authorities and frequently rebelled against it. But tax revenue was essential to the Roman Empire and Rome demanded taxes from its provinces. However, at the time of Jesus, the Romans didn’t collect their own provincial taxes. They contracted the dirty business of tax collection to people known as ‘Tax Farmers’, referred to in Greek as ‘Telones’. They were also referred to as ‘Publicani’, public contractors or ‘public service providers’¹, which, incidentally, is why Levi, otherwise known as Matthew, is often referred to as the publican, not because he ran the first century Judean equivalent of the Black Swan. Telones, or Tax Farmers, were private citizens who bid at auction for the right to collect tax revenues within their particular district. The Greek word used to describe Zacchaeus is ‘Architelones’, where the prefix ‘Ark’ or ‘Arch’ means ‘Principal’ or ‘chief’, so Zacchaeus would have been the chief tax-collector of Jericho. More often than not, the Tax Farmers abused their position to line their own pockets or, as Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, so eloquently puts it ‘the more the publicani could screw out of the provincials, the bigger their own take’². For this

¹ Beard, M (2016) *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*. London: Profile Books Ltd, p. 263.

² Ibid.

reason, Zacchaeus and the other Tax Farmers were despised and scorned by the people. Indeed, Hans K ung, the Swiss Catholic priest and theologian, explains that tax collectors were considered to be ‘miserable sinners...odious cheats and swindlers, grown rich in the service of the occupying power, afflicted with permanent uncleanness as collaborators and as traitors to the national cause...’³.

Despised, unclean and rejected he may have been but, nevertheless, Zacchaeus was there with the crowds of people jostling to see Jesus as he was passing through Jericho. Clambering up the Sycamore tree was clearly not the act of a man concerned with upholding his dignity and authority, but Zacchaeus, despite his prosperity and position, is evidently a dissatisfied man. Earlier in Luke, we hear Jesus telling his disciples that ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’⁴. It’s very clear what Zacchaeus’s treasure is and where his heart is; his treasure is money and his heart is a heart set on the accumulation of material wealth. Perhaps he recognises though that the comfort his wealth had once given him no longer mitigates the growing emptiness he feels, an emptiness that all the wealth he has accumulated cannot subdue.

Although Zacchaeus’s mind and heart may have been firmly rooted in the material world, the tree in this story is, perhaps, an indication that something is indeed changing for him. The symbolism associated with trees is complex, but trees can be representative of spiritual development and growth, the link between the material and the spiritual dimensions. They can symbolise the movement from being rooted in the things of this world to a reaching out into the realm of the divine; the journey from

³ K ung, H (1977) *On Being a Christian*. London: Collins, p. 271.

⁴ Luke 12:34 (NRSV)

ignorance to awakening; the journey of inner transformation. In particular, the sycamore tree is thought to symbolise spiritual regeneration and rebirth so Zacchaeus's climbing of the sycamore tree can be understood as representing of his desire for spiritual renewal. Jesus' unconditional love transforms Zacchaeus and transforms his outlook on life. When he meets with Jesus, Jesus doesn't mock or demean him, instead he loves and accepts him and overwhelms him with kindness. Jesus invites himself to his home and, no doubt, shares a meal with him. Hans K ung, the aforementioned Swiss theologian, explains that 'for Jesus this fellowship at table with those whom the devout had written off was not merely the expression of liberal tolerance and humanitarian sentiment. It was the expression of his mission and message: peace and reconciliation for all, without exception...' ⁵. The story of Zacchaeus tells us that we don't have to be defined by who we were or what we may have done in the past. God sees through these things to our true self and new life and new beginnings are always open to us.

Through Jesus, Zacchaeus experiences the spiritual rebirth symbolised by the Sycamore tree. He doesn't ask for salvation, salvation comes to his house, to him. It comes to him because he simply responds to Jesus' invitation... "come down from the tree and take me into your house". It seems to me that the house is a metaphor for the heart, the innermost abode or dwelling place of the Spirit or, as the writer John Davidson describes it, 'the temple of the Living God, the God who is the source of life and being' ⁶. Jesus tells Zacchaeus to take him into his house, his abode, his

⁵ K ung, H (1977) *On Being a Christian*. London: Collins, p. 273.

⁶ Davidson, J. (1995) *The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of His Original Teachings*. Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books Limited, p.201.

place of dwelling, his heart, and Zacchaeus is 'happy to welcome him'⁷. The French Benedictine monk Abhishiktananda explains that 'the Spirit is there in (everyone), in the 'cave of the heart', waiting for the moment when (they are) at last ready, sufficiently silent to hear his voice and sufficiently free to yield to his influence'⁸.

Zacchaeus was at last ready, ready to welcome God into the cave of his heart, ready to leave behind his old life and embrace a new way of being. Zacchaeus has known what it is to be rejected, to be an outsider, but Jesus accepts him and reminds everyone that 'he too is a son of Abraham', just as he had earlier declared that the crippled woman was a 'daughter of Abraham'⁹. Jesus is explaining that it's not our ancestral lineage, or an obedience to ancient tradition, that makes us part of God's spiritual family, but our faith, our awakening to 'God (as) supreme reality...the one who is wholly real'¹⁰, the one who changes our lives.

John Martin Sahajananda, another Benedictine monk and a disciple of Father Bede Griffiths, suggests that Zacchaeus represents 'our rejected self, the self that has moved from God but which is longing for God'¹¹. He goes on to say that 'for God humanity is lost; for humanity, God is lost. Jesus and Zacchaeus represent the beautiful meeting of God and humanity'¹². We meet God not by jumping through belief shaped hoops, there are no hoops for us to jump through. We meet God when, as Abhishiktananda tells us, we are 'sufficiently silent to hear his voice and sufficiently free to yield to his influence'. When our prayer becomes what Thomas

⁷ Luke 19:6 (NRSV)

⁸ Abhishiktananda (1976) *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*. Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., p.78.

⁹ Luke 13:16 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Main, J (2007) *The Heart of Creation. Meditation: A Way of Setting God Free in the World*. London: The Canterbury Press Norwich, p. 23.

¹¹ Sahajananda, J. M. (2003) *You are the Light*. Winchester, O Books, p.63.

¹² Ibid.

Merton described as 'a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence'¹³, in other words, when we engage with silence and stillness in what the Christian tradition calls contemplative prayer, then we can be 'sufficiently silent' and 'sufficiently free' to meet God. It is 'silence', explains Isaac of Nineveh, that 'will unite you to God'¹⁴. The silence and stillness that we engage with in contemplative prayer enables us to symbolically climb the tree, so that we too can have the clear vision, the new perspective, the fresh vantage point, which enables us to encounter God, the God who is always encountering us. It is in this encounter that we simply have to open our arms and, like Zacchaeus, welcome Him into our heart.

Amen.

¹³ Merton, T (2018) *Where Prayer Flourishes*. London: Canterbury Press, p.18.

¹⁴ Isaac of Nineveh in: Merton, T (2018) *Where Prayer Flourishes*. London: Canterbury Press, p.19.