

Year C Proper 26

Luke 19:1-10

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the best short stories in the Gospels. It only appears in Luke's Gospel and I can remember first hearing it in Sunday school when I was very small. I remember that the story was acted out by other children with all sorts of exaggerated gestures and running and climbing and fun. And those images from childhood have proved to be still the best way to appreciate this story. If you were only allowed one word to describe the story I

wonder if you would agree with me that the word should be 'extravagance'.

Zacchaeus is introduced to us as a chief tax collector who was rich. So on both counts this is not looking too good to start with! True, Jesus has just told a parable which has portrayed a tax collector in a favourable light, but here we have the chief tax collector and that's another thing altogether: here is the chief rogue, the chief robber of the poor. He would have a team of tax collectors under him and he would have been one of the most despised men in Jericho. To make matters worse he is described as being rich. The

Jesus who is presented in Luke's Gospel has had some very strong things to say about riches. Remember, for one, the parable about the rich man building bigger barns? Our expectation of a happy outcome is not great at the beginning of the narrative. But the mood soon changes... We have before us an intriguing little man who is stubborn and bold. He would have spent that day looking at people's backs. There was no prospect of him being able to change his view without radically changing his environment. And that was the moment of crisis for him. He had a decision to make. Would it be

worthwhile to think out of the box for a solution or would it not be easier to just go back home? Well, it would, of course, have been easier to give up, but it wasn't in his nature.

George Mallory was the famed mountain climber who may have been the first person ever to reach the top of Mount Everest. In the early 1920's he led a number of attempts to scale the mountain, eventually being killed in the third attempt in 1924. Before that last and fatal attempt he had said "I can't see myself coming down defeated."

Mallory was an extraordinary climber, and nothing would force him to give up. His body was found in 1999, well preserved by the snow and ice, 27,000 feet up the mountain, just 2000 feet from the peak. Give up he did not. His body was found face down on a rocky slope, head toward the summit. His arms were extended high over his head. His toes were pointed into the mountain; his fingers dug into the loose rock, refusing to let go even as he drew his last breath. A short length of cotton rope – broken – was looped around his waist.

When those who had set up camp for Mallory further down the mountain returned to England a banquet was held for them. A huge picture of Mt Everest stood behind the banquet table. It is said that the leader of the group stood to be applauded, and with tears streaming down his face, turned and looked at the picture. "I speak to you, Mt Everest, in the name of all brave men living and those yet unborn" he said. "Mt Everest, you defeated us once; you defeated us twice; you defeated us three times. But Mt Everest, we shall someday defeat you, because you can't get any bigger but we can."

In 1953 two climbers, Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, reached the top.¹

“You can’t get any bigger, but we can!” “You can’t get any bigger, crowds, but I can!” said Zacchaeus to himself. And up the tree he went. This small man had a big heart. The moment he climbed the tree he was revealing himself to the crowd who despised him. Who would want to put himself in that kind of situation? - someone who didn’t care or someone who was desperate. The extravagance of this man’s efforts; running

¹ Seattle Times (Jan 16, 2000)

ahead and then climbing the tree could not go unnoticed. And they didn't. Jesus arrived at the foot of the tree and breaking all the rules of social convention, addressed the hated tax collector and invited himself to his house! How extraordinary! But you know, that's the kind of extravagant greeting that Zacchaeus needed. He didn't want Jesus to wander past the tree and carry on down the road with the crowd swarming around the base of the tree. He wanted Jesus to stop. He wanted Jesus to look up and see him. He wanted Jesus to invite himself back to his place. We often live

hoping for the lucky break. We live intentionally, hoping to find our way to the goals that we have set for ourselves in life. Often, we get there. But we don't get there by chance. We get there because we have been putting ourselves in the right place, time and time again, so that when the opportunity comes we can seize it. By running on ahead and by climbing the tree Zacchaeus had put himself in the way of Jesus. He could do no more than that. Jesus, who had come to seek out and save the lost, was looking for him already and Zacchaeus' endeavours were fully rewarded.

All of you can be sure today that Jesus is looking for you. You can stay hidden at crowd level and he might very well find you there but you can be sure if you climb the tree, he'll see you! In other words, any effort you make to move towards Jesus will be rewarded by his attention.

The crowd have their own opinion on all of this. There is no doubt in their opinion that Jesus should not be associating with cheats like Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus cuts off their protests with the extravagance of his repentance. Half his possessions and four times what he has defrauded is way beyond

what the law would demand of him. Here was Zacchaeus' chance of a future and he was not going to miss out.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is one of the greatest novelists of all time. He describes an experience when he was 27 as a turning point in his life. Dostoyevsky came from the privileged class of 19th century Russia, but was committed to the liberation of the oppressed working class, the serfs. He joined a revolutionary liberation group, and as a result was arrested in April 1849. Placed in a maximum security prison, conditions were terrible. Dostoyevsky slept on a hard straw

bed in a small, damp room without much light. For eight months Dostoyevsky and his fellow prisoners were questioned and kept in jail.

In October, the prisoners were removed from their cells and led to waiting carriages. They were not sure of their fate, but assumed the sentence would be light. When the carriages stopped, the prisoners were led onto a square and lined up on a gallows. The men were sentenced to be shot; they were given a cross to kiss, the chance to confess to a priest, and then were dressed in peasant shirts and hoods for the execution. The first

three men in line were led to some stakes and tied; the soldiers took aim, and held their positions. Then from nowhere a drum roll was heard and a messenger from the Tsar rode in on a horse, with a pardon for Dostoyevsky and his fellow prisoners. They were taken back to prison, with the intention they be sent to prison in Siberia.

In a letter to his brother Mikhail, Dostoyevsky describes his new outlook towards life. "When I look back on my past and think how much time I wasted on nothing, how much time has been lost in futilities, errors, laziness, incapacity to live;

how little I appreciated it, how many times I sinned against my heart and soul – then my heart bleeds. Life is a gift, life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of happiness.”

In a novel he later wrote, *The Idiot*, Dostoyevsky describes an execution scene similar to the one he experienced. he describes the thoughts of the 27 year old victim as he awaited death, certainly his reflections on his own near execution. “What if I didn’t have to die!...I would turn every minute into an age, nothing would be

wasted, every minute would be accounted for.”²

Zacchaeus’ riches could have potentially ruined him. There is no doubt that if Zacchaeus had not addressed the issue first, then Jesus would have done so. But Zacchaeus was not going to miss his opportunity. He knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted to be realised from his bondage to exploitation and to riches and he gladly embraced the hope that Jesus brought to him. We are all offered that same hope

² Dostoyevsky 1874 *The Idiot* Part 1, chapter 5

and the onus is on us to receive it joyfully
and extravagantly just like Zacchaeus.