**A reading from Luke’s Gospel, chapter 19, beginning to read at verse 1.**

**19** Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

**2** A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

**3** He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd.

**4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

**5** When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, **“Zacchaeus, come down immediately.**

**I must stay at your house today.”**

**6** So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

**7** All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

**8** But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

**9** Jesus said to him,

**“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”**

SERMON:

I wonder, how would I like it if someone cheated me – not once, but repeatedly – and then I picked up a newspaper and saw that one of the town fathers had hosted a dinner in this cheater's honour?

I probably wouldn't like it much.  In fact, I would be furious.

These days, so many scoundrels get rich and famous.

Sometimes it seems as if there's no justice.

Something like that happened in our Gospel lesson today.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector – a CHIEF tax collector.

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was RICH.

A chief tax collector would have ordinary tax collectors working for him, and each of them would give the chief tax collector a cut of their collections.

Tax collectors usually did very well for themselves – financially speaking.  Of course, they didn't have many friends – but that went with the territory.

 By the time of our story, Jesus had become a celebrity – a young and upcoming rabbi known for his teachings and miracles.

Wherever he went, people flocked to see him.

 Jesus had come to Jericho – not far from Jerusalem.  He was just passing through, so people came from hither and thither to see him before he left town.

Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector, was one of them.

We should be surprised that Zacchaeus came to see Jesus.  People who do dark things don't usually come to the light.  Crooks don't usually come to preachers – or to anyone else who might point an accusing finger.

 But Zacchaeus **did** come to see Jesus.  Perhaps there was something in his heart that wanted a new kind of life.  Maybe he was just curious.

But when Zacchaeus came to the street where Jesus would be passing, he couldn't see a thing.  Crowds of people had arrived earlier, and you can be sure that no one was going to step aside to let Zacchaeus see better.

 The problem was compounded by the fact that Zacchaeus was short.  Most of us know how it feels to have our view blocked by a tall person – or someone wearing a hat – or someone standing when they should be sitting.

But Zacchaeus was a resourceful fellow – a man who knew how to solve problems.  His solution was to climb a tree where he would have an unobstructed view – where he could easily see as Jesus came down the street.

That can't have been easy for Zacchaeus.  People might not like him, but they knew him as a man of authority.  Zacchaeus had to be careful.  If he appeared ridiculous, people might begin to laugh at him instead of fearing him.  Then where would he be?

But Zacchaeus really wanted to see this young celebrity rabbi, so he took a chance on climbing a tree.  If he got lucky, people would be so focused on seeing Jesus that they wouldn't notice the important tax collector climbing a tree.

But no such luck.  When Jesus came along, he spotted Zacchaeus sitting in that tree – and blew Zacchaeus' cover to smithereens.  He looked upward and shouted,

**"Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree, because I must stay at your house today”.**

Let’s pay attention to what Jesus said:

• First of all, He said, **"I MUST."**Jesus says "I must" four times in the Gospel of Luke, and once more in the Gospel of John.  In each instance, he says "I must" in such a way as to mean "I have this mission"

or "I have this God-given duty."

• And Jesus said, **"I must STAY at your house."**The Greek word for stay is *Meno*, which is usually translated "abide" or "dwell" or "remain."   It suggests something more than a casual visit.  It has the ring of permanence.  When Jesus says that he must STAY at Zacchaeus' house, it sounds as if he intends to live there.

But, of course, Jesus doesn't intend to stay at Zacchaeus' house permanently.  In fact, before the day is out, Jesus will leave Jericho to go to Jerusalem.  He is going to Jerusalem to die.

But in another sense, Jesus DOES intend to say at Zacchaeus' home permanently.  He intends to dwell forevermore in Zacchaeus' **heart**.

And that happened, because Zacchaeus came down from the tree – Luke tells us that he came down QUICKLY.

If you have ever climbed a tree, you know that you don't usually come down from a tree quickly – unless you fall.

Zacchaeus came down from that tree QUICKLY – and he welcomed Jesus JOYFULLY.  The young rabbi was honouring Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus was grateful.

The people, on the other hand, were offended.  They complained that the young rabbi had chosen to stay with a SINFUL man – had chosen to honour an UNDESERVING man.

Perhaps we know exactly how they felt.  We’ve seen undeserving people elevated to high office.  We’ve heard **"Hail to the Chief"** played for people whose moral bankruptcy is public knowledge.  We long for GOOD leadership – for the chance to honour DESERVING people.

But when Jesus came down out of that tree, two things happened immediately:

• **Firstly**, Zacchaeus showed that he "got it" – that he knew that he needed to change – and that he intended to do it.  He promised Jesus that he would give half of his money to the poor – and would repay fourfold anyone whom he had defrauded.

• **Secondly**, Jesus validated Zacchaeus' promise, saying,

**"Today, salvation has come to this house, because (Zacchaeus) also is a son of Abraham".**

And then Jesus delivered the punch line. He said,

**"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost"**.

**When we hear that, who comes to mind?**

• Is it the person who has ruined his life with alcohol or drugs?

• Is it the criminal sitting in a nearby jail?

• Is it a business owner who takes advantage of the poor?

• Is it a politician whose focus is on self-enrichment rather than service?

Are those the people whom Jesus came to save?  **Yes!**  Those people need saving, and Jesus came to save people like that.

But what about US sitting in this church?   Is there any chance that Jesus was talking about you and me, when he said that he had come **"to seek and to save that which is lost"**?

Do we ever think of ourselves as Zacchaeus kinds of people?

Do we ever think of ourselves as sinners – undeserving of God's favour?  Do you ever worry about finding ourselves in trouble on Judgment Day?

I’m sure that many of us have felt that way – inadequate – unlovable ––undeserving.  Many of us prefer not to think too much about Judgment Day, because we doubt that we will measure up.

If that's what we think, we're right.  We don't measure up.  We won't measure up.  We're inadequate, undeserving.  We're sinners.

But that's just the first part of the story.  Here's the rest of it.

Jesus said that he came **"to seek and to save that which was lost"**  I believe he was talking about ALL OF US!  Jesus came to seek US and to save US – and he has done just that.

• He started seeking us before the creation of the world.

• He started seeking us before we were born.

• He started working out a plan to save us when the earth was still a formless void – “when darkness covered the face of the deep”.

• He has been seeking us forever.

• His purpose was never to condemn, but to save.

**That's the point of the Zacchaeus story.**  If Jesus could save Zacchaeus, he can save us.

If he **has** saved Zacchaeus, he has also saved **us**.

**But there’s more!**

When Jesus called Zacchaeus to come down from the tree, Zacchaeus did two things:

• First, he scrambled down that tree as fast as his little arms and legs could carry him.

• Second, he repented of his old behaviour, and promised to do better.

I doubt that Zacchaeus became a pristine man who never did another bad thing.

I doubt that we always do the right thing. **I know I don't**.

So I'm grateful to Paul, the apostle, who recounted his own struggles with sin.  He said:

**"I don't know what I am doing.**

**For I don't practice what I desire to do;**

**but what I hate, that I do....**

**For the good which I desire, I don't do;**

**but the evil which I don't desire, that I (do)"**

Those words give us hope.  If the Apostle Paul couldn't get his act together, perhaps there's hope for me.  Perhaps there's hope for all of us.

The message for today today is that there's no "perhaps" about it.

**Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost.**

 Furthermore, he has done that.  He has saved us.

So let's do what Zacchaeus did:

 • Let's climb down from the tree where we were hoping to observe Jesus from a **distance**.

• Let's receive him JOYFULLY!

• And let's do our best to live up to our high calling in Christ's service.