The Extravagant Behaviour of Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

Jesus and Zacchaeus

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ 8Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’ 9Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’

Have you noticed how many ‘road ahead closed’ signs there are at present? Not the road immediately ahead but some way ahead. In our scripture readings together, the road ahead appears to be closed for the various recipients of the message given by the prophet Isaiah, the Thessalonian listeners to Paul’s letter to them and to Zacchaeus. Indeed, the story of Zacchaeus is one of the best short stories in the Gospels even though it only crops up in Luke’s Gospel. So what do I mean?

Zacchaeus is introduced to us as a chief tax collector who was rich which does not sound a particularly promising start but if just one word was needed to describe this account it would be the word – “extravagance”. And he is at a watershed in his life, or, to continue my road analogy, at a junction in the road.

Back in chapter 18 of Luke, Jesus delivers the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector in which the tax collector comes out better. In this account, just one chapter on, we find the chief of the tax collectors. Now, we may groan about HMRC, but it is an impersonal organisation run according to strict regulations and directives and most unlikely to have individual collectors trying to make a bit on the side.

But in Jesus day that was not the case and it was quite common for individual collectors to enhance their personal wealth through some creative accounting. Not surprisingly this did not make them the most popular people of Jericho. So, we now have the Chief Collector who would have created his wealth at the expense of the populace.

So, it does seem surprising to us that that Jesus, who has some strong things to say about riches, appears to warm to Zacchaeus – remember the parable of the rich fool in chapter 12 where the rich fool builds bigger barns for yet more stuff and Jesus warns him that he’s a fool because when he dies the riches he has amassed will be enjoyed by others rather than himself and in the process has neglected to prepare his soul for the life hereafter

So, having been primed with some what we presume to be some damning information about Zacchaeus, we do not expect the best. But the mood soon changes… And what we discover is that Zacchaeus is an intriguing little man who is both stubborn and bold. ‘Small in stature’ he would be lost in a crowd; all he would have seen would have been everyone’s backs. So, to borrow a phrase from Baldrick of Black Adder fame, he came up with a cunning plan.

There was no prospect of Zacchaeus being able to change his view, without radically changing his position. And that was the moment of crisis for him. He had a decision to make. He had reached a crossroads, which way should he turn?

Well, it would, of course, have been easier to give up, but it wasn’t in his nature, just as it wasn’t in the nature of the mountaineer, George Mallory who was possibly the first person to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

*In the early 1920s, 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 2,000 feet from the peak. And give up, he had not because when his body was found it was 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 and a huge picture of Mt Everest stood behind the banquet table.*

*When the leader of the group stood to be applauded, with tears streaming down his face he 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.”*

*As we know, in 1953, two climbers, Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, reached the top.*

“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.

The moment he climbed the tree, Zacchaeus showed himself to the crowd who would have despised him, the rich chief tax collector.

Who and why 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 ahead and then climbing the tree – could not go unnoticed. And he 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. The question that has to be asked is, did Zacchaeus want Jesus to notice him? To stop? I think the answer has to be ‘yes’ because he must have realised that by climbing up that tree he went from being invisible to being very very visible. Luke tells us that he climbed up into the tree because he wanted to see ‘who Jesus was’. If he wanted to draw attention to himself then, it certainly worked, as Jesus looked up and saw him and then invited himself to his house.

Jesus, who had come to seek out and save the lost, was looking for Zacchaeus and all like him already and Zacchaeus’ endeavours were fully rewarded.

How does that translate for us? Well, we can stay hidden at crowd level and he might very well find us there but you can be sure, if you climb the tree, he’ll see you!

In other words, any effort you make to move to towards Jesus will be rewarded by his attention.

The crowd had their own opinion on all of this. No doubt, in their opinion, Jesus should not be associating with sinners like Zacchaeus.

But 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. He had turned a corner, the road ahead would no longer be a dead-end, it was not closed ahead.

Fydor Dostoyevsky 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 and he joined a revolutionary liberation group and, as a result, was arrested in April 1849. He very nearly met an early death via a firing squad but, at the very last moment was reprieved with his punishment commuted to imprisonment in Siberia. This narrow escape changed entirely his outlook towards life, as he wrote in a letter to his brother:

“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.”

Zacchaeus’ riches could have potentially ruined him. His life would have become a dead-end.

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

Now there might be a temptation to ignore our other two readings, after all the story of Zacchaeus is warm, human, vivid and, best of all, has a happy ending. But our OT reading from Isaiah and our epistle to the Thessalonians remind us that Zacchaeus’, at his crossroads made a choice that not the one everyone would make.

For Isaiah, holiness is the most definitive characteristic of God and throughout this part of Isaiah he is pointing out that only Israel is too stupid to understand what they owe God, pointing out that even the animals know to whom they belong. Here we find God addressing his people who are already beaten and sore from the wars they are involved in and yet still cannot make the connection between their choice and the sorry state they are in. They are blindly driving along the road to their eventual deaths. And what Isaiah is telling them is that God is not interested in the shoddy sacrifices they are offering Him, pure lip service to true worship. Their prayers are intended to change God and have forgotten that the primary purpose of prayer is to change the one who prays.

God reminds them what they are called for, which is to be a community that demonstrates love and justice and so bears witness to the nature of God. Until they return to their calling, everything they say to God is simply empty words. The choice is theirs – God’s forgiveness will be total, but so will be his judgment. They are heading down the road in the wrong direction, on the way to a dead-end.

Finally, we come to 2 Thessalonians which is uncomfortably full of judgment too. Unlike the community Isaiah is addressing, this one knows what they should be. They are commended by their love and faith and they have the satisfaction of knowing that their witness is helping others to see God. in other words, they are being exactly what they are meant to be: images, witnesses and mirrors of God. Even in the face of persecution they are not tempted to be like the people of Israel in Isaiah – demanding release and trying to force God to be nice to them. Instead, they face and accept their fate with gladness because they see it as an opportunity to demonstrate their faith and trust. They know that they are making God’s glory visible in their lives now, by their witness but the awesome holiness and majesty of God will be revealed very soon and their whole lives have been a preparation for that moment and the hope of it makes all that they are suffering worthwhile. The road ahead for them is open and is taking them to eternal joy.

The thought that our choices have ultimate consequences is not one we are very comfortable with but is the unmistakable conclusion to be drawn from both the Isaiah and Thessalonians accounts. Our lives are valuable and meaningful only when they are put in the context of God’s whole purpose for creation. Separated from the ‘presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might’ we cease to exist.

Choices have consequences but in God’s mercy, you may have more than one to choose, more than one way to turn. Zacchaeus thought he had made one set of choices, but faced with Jesus, he chooses again. Now, he chooses to be what he was created for, a child of Abraham, and inheritor of God’s great promise of love and faithfulness.

Amen