

Sermon	4 th Sunday before Advent
Year C	St James

Our reading this morning is one of those stories that I have heard over and over again. It is that kind of story, that grounds me in reality – in a way I find it one of those stories that gets a heart of the matter.

You see, in our gospel we have a man who, and there is no easy way of saying this – hated, ostracised, disowned. He was a man on the outside. I suspect he was the person who everybody avoided – getting similar reactions that thugs get, that sometimes homeless people get when they are living on our streets. Yet, for Zacchaeus – that is how things were.

Yes, he was a tax collector – but we are not talking HMRC standard here! No charters, or laid down rules that were clear –and followed.

No, things at this time were different.

At this time, the Jews opposed forced Roman taxes. Tax collectors were among the most unpopular people in Israel, primarily because it was common knowledge that tax collectors were making themselves personally rich from the taxes they collected. Zacchaeus was top of his profession, and as such was one of the most hated man in the district, due to how wealthy and how he got his wealth.

But just like everybody else in the town of Jericho – Jesus had entered the town and everybody wanted to see him. To be fair, although Zacchaeus was rich – he wasn't popular and to see anything he had to be on outside of the crowd. Zacchaeus – a man who had few friends if any, climbed up that sycamore tree to see him. Just to get a view, the merest sight.

Now I want you to imagine yourself in the crowd that day – cheering, and welcoming Jesus – a sense of euphoria – but then, guess what, the person who you have waited for hours in the crowd, in hot sweaty conditions, calls not you, not your friend, who also does good work – but of all people Zacchaeus. – Zacchaeus – not the kind of person you’d expect.

I often wondered what the reaction of the crowd would have been – and reaction to Jesus.

“what’s in it for Zacchaeus?”, He’s rich enough already! You can almost hear the criticism, as Zacchaeus was greeted by Jesus and entertained him with some of the wealth obtained under suspicious circumstances. Indeed as he made his surprising confession and decision to repay – you can hear some cry out that “Now he wants to buy his honour”.

But Jesus, having called the good that was in Zacchaeus, responded with acceptance and encouragement that hopefully silenced the scornful.

St Paul is also similarly encouraging towards the Thessalonians, praising their courage and fortitude and encouraging them ever onwards, upwards, forwards to the best of all goals. They had been through great trials, they had been tested, but Paul encourages them that although there’s some way to go, were praying for you!

Jesus and Paul, identify the goodness in others and encouraged it to grow. They know that these people have sinned, but as the old saying goes – never judge the book by simply looking at the cover. Do we reflect Jesus and Paul, do we look for the goodness in others and help them likewise? Are we more ready to affirm than to put down? To encourage than to criticize? To build up confidence than to humiliate?

There was once a man, whose sole purpose was to hound a group of people who did not toe the party line. He pursued them relentlessly – dragging them from their home and family, treating them brutally, engineering their incarceration, torture, and even death. His name became the byword for cruelty.

Yet God saw the positive side, the goodness if you like – and on that Damascus Road, turned Saul's abundant energy, enthusiasm, and singlemindedness onto Christian Drive and Determination.

Yes I am talking about Paul – who would never forget the chance he had been given – he was a living example of what divine encouragement had done, and now he was in the business of encouraging others in their faith.

God's call puts us under a great responsibility, which we need not see as pressure, but as an exciting challenge.

He has counted us worthy of the invitation to represent him on earth – one of the lines of the Eucharistic prayer that always creates a sense of awe in me is where the prayer we saythank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.....

It is no surprise that Zacchaeus hung onto a sycamore tree – perhaps we should choose to live our life in the sycamore tree. The sycamore tree created a clear line of vision for Zacchaeus. It helped him to rise above the crowd and see the Lord more clearly. It placed him in the right position for the invitation that would follow. Jesus told him to come down for he was coming to his house!

Imagine the thrill – for us the sycamore tree is a symbol of that place in our own lives which enable us to have a clear vision of Jesus. Zacchaeus did not hesitate. There he heard the call that would forever change his life. So

may it with all of us. When God calls we only have one choice – to respond without reserve. The invitation of this story is to climb that sycamore tree. To find the place that will make it possible for us to see Jesus, unimpeded, so as to hear him call our name.

When we see Jesus on the Jericho road in our own lives we are invited to exercise our faith. To choose him and change. It's simply not about changing your behaviour. It is changing your boss. When the boss changes from you to Christ your behaviour will be transformed.