

Zacchaeus

27 11 16

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life
in which your Son Jesus Christ
came to us in great humility;
that on the last day
when he will come again in glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal.

Our text may be found in the St Luke, chapter 19 and verse 9:

'he too is a son of Abraham.'

Today is Advent Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, with four Sundays including today in which to look forward to Christmas and to remember our belief in the Second Coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Advent is also a chance for you to sponsor a sermon, to choose a text or a theme, and today's theme, chosen and sponsored by Carolyn Hewitt, is that of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is a Sunday school favourite. There's a chorus we used to sing in Pathfinders about Zacchaeus being a very little man who climbed up into a

sycamore tree to see Jesus and Jesus telling him to come down because he, Jesus, was going to come to his house for tea. Don't you love it? And I guess Zacchaeus is much loved because he was small, too small to see Jesus over the heads of the crowds on the streets of Jericho who also wanted to do the same so Zacchaeus, like a small boy, runs on ahead, climbs up a tree and was called down by Jesus who was able to reconnect him with his faith in God and, like the lost sheep, Zacchaeus is found by the good shepherd; like the prodigal son, Zacchaeus is welcomed home by his father.

That said, Carolyn slipped me an article in the Irish Times by Fergal Jennings published on Saturday 29th October, the day before Luke 19 verses 1 – 10 is the gospel passage for the Fourth Sunday before Advent in Year 3 of our Common Lectionary. And what he writes is pretty harsh stuff, not only on Zacchaeus, a Chief Collector of Taxes, but also on our tolerance of bad behaviour in general.

Now I don't want to go the road of criticising inappropriate behaviour today this morning but that in itself would be a great subject for a sermon if anyone else would like to sponsor one in January. But this morning, let me limit myself to just Zacchaeus and address the clear point that Fergal Jennings is making: that 'Zacchaeus is a rather repulsive character . . . who cheated people . . . Of all the sinners in the Gospels one of the nastiest . . . His crimes were not one-off . . . his harmfulness went on and on.'

And we are back remembering how bad a reputation tax collectors had at the time of Jesus. Tax was something the Jews had to pay to Rome. Taxes were actually

collected by people who paid for the privilege of being tax gatherers because by collecting taxes, they were able to make a bit on the side by charging more than they had to. Pharisees, in particular, loathed and condemned tax collectors as traitors to Judaism, collaborators with the uncircumcised, Jews who were clearly beyond the pale because they were abusing their fellow Jews by their sinful behaviour.

Now, we know Jesus had at least one tax collector among his disciples, Matthew, the writer of the first of four gospels in our Bible. We know that Jesus sometimes went and ate with them, that he talked to them. That was not to say that Jesus did not challenge them to be better and certainly Matthew is an example of one who left the tax office and his money behind to follow the man he came to know as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus with his own eyes. He must have heard about him and wanted to see him for himself, albeit at a distance, and what happens strangely enough is Jesus sees Zacchaeus, notices a man up a tree and calls to him to come down and that he was going to go to his house that day. Shock, horror – fraternising with sinners again. But, to Zacchaeus, the encounter is life-changing. Rich, Zacchaeus promises to give half his wealth to the poor and to pay back any he has defrauded four times the amount which, according to Jewish Law, was roughly three times more than he would have had to.

But what I love in the story, what has the power to move me to tears, is the wonderful statement by Jesus of Zacchaeus which is our text today – **‘he too is a**

son of Abraham.’ The lost has been found; the sinner has been restored to right living; Zacchaeus is once again part of the family of God.

So let me end by quoting the end of Fergal Jennings’s thought–provoking article:
‘. . . the good news is that Zacchaeus was a little man but was big enough to change, thus earning our enduring love.’

And my question – are you ? are we ? big enough too to change ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew’s, Dinard

27th November 2016

G: Sermons 35: Zacchaeus

