

Welcoming Jesus

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. He ran ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When 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." So, he hurried down and was excited to welcome Jesus.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus 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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Background

To catch the deeper meaning of the story of Zacchaeus, we need to remember its historical context.

For almost a hundred years, even since the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C, the Jews had lived under the rule of Rome. Perhaps the most onerous aspect of Roman rule, apart from the mere insult of being a subject people, was taxation. It took a lot of money for Rome to administrate its empire, and they got this from taxing their subjects. For the Jews, taxation, in addition to being costly, was a tangible sign of foreign domination. So, almost to a person, the Jews hated paying taxes to Rome.

Rome didn't collect taxes, however. This was farmed out to the private sector. Certain Jews were willing to become tax collectors. For obvious reasons, they were seen as turncoats, and were hated by their fellow Jews. To make matters even worse, tax collectors had the freedom to overcharge people, and to keep the extra money for themselves.

Walking Through the Story

In climbing the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus seems prompted by curiosity. At times, God's meetings with man do appear to be merely accidental. But nothing that God does happens by chance. Zacchaeus had no idea that the curiosity which had prompted him to do such an unusual thing was already the fruit of mercy which had preceded him, attracted him and was about to change him in the depths of his heart.

This mercy begins to reveal itself in the surprise of Jesus' action as he comes up upon Zacchaeus's tree. Rather than merely walking by, as would have been expected, Jesus stopped, looked up at the little man in the tree, and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay your house today."

Zacchaeus Welcomes Jesus

Zacchaeus jumped down from his branch and, Luke says, "was happy to welcome him." Here's our key word, "welcome." Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus. Once again, we see that this wasn't simply a handshake. In Jewish culture of the first-century A.D., eating together was a sign of friendship, of intimacy. Zacchaeus was pleased to receive Jesus, not just into his home, but also into his private world, into his family, into his life, into his heart. Moreover, in a profound sense, Zacchaeus was welcoming, not only Jesus, but also God into his life in a new way.

Who Welcomes Whom?

On one level, this story illustrates how we can respond to God's grace by welcoming him. When God calls out to us - sometimes through preaching, sometimes as we read his Word, sometimes through the still, small voice of the Spirit, sometimes through the human voices of other Christians, sometimes through suffering - we respond by hearing his voice and welcoming him.

The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that we welcome Christ, not on our own initiative, but in response to his. It may seem as if we're seeking God, and in a sense we are. But in a larger sense God is seeking us first.

That's part of the ironic surprise in the Zacchaeus story. Jesus doesn't wait for an invitation from Zacchaeus, does he? Rather, he breaks the social code by inviting himself over. It's as if he's the host, the first welcomer. And in a sense, he is. Though Zacchaeus gets to respond by literally welcoming Jesus into his home, Jesus first welcomes Jesus into his merciful fellowship.

And so, it is with us. Jesus invites himself into our lives. He doesn't push his way in. He respects our freedom to respond to him. Yet he makes it clear that the initiative for relationship is not ours, but his. We welcome Jesus because he has first welcomed us.

What Jesus Offers

Notice, too, what Jesus offers to Zacchaeus. He doesn't say "Here's a ticket to heaven." And he doesn't say, "Here's a new way of living." And he doesn't say, "Here's how to get back in fellowship with your neighbours." All these things would come, but because of Jesus' primary gift. And what is this?

To Zacchaeus, Jesus offers himself: "I must stay at your house." He himself is the gift that awaits Zacchaeus, and he is also "God's law" for Zacchaeus.

Now once we welcome Jesus, many things follow, including the hope of heaven, a new way of living, and fellowship with others. As the example of Zacchaeus makes so clear, welcoming Jesus leads to a profound transformation of life. When we invite Jesus into our lives, we learn to seek first the Kingdom of God and God's own way of living (Matthew 6:33). Our hearts and our lives are transformed.

Jesus offers himself, first and foremost. In this relationship come all sorts of benefits, like forgiveness of sins, as well as a new focus for living, serving Christ as your Lord. But the

"stuff" Christ gives us and asks from us is not the centre of Christianity. Relationship with Jesus, and through him with the Triune God, is the centre. This is what Jesus offers most of all.

If you are a Christian, this may be a good time for you to see how you're doing with Jesus. It's easy to start with him, but then to get distracted along the way. Thus, we turn the Christian life primarily into a matter of doing the right things, or avoiding the wrong things, or polishing our theology, or caring for the poor, or whatever. These are all wonderful and important aspects of Christian living. But they're not the main thing. We're reminded by the story of Zacchaeus, to welcome Jesus into our lives and to grow in our relationship with him.

Have you welcomed Jesus? I'm not talking merely about the first invitation, whereby you received him as Saviour and Lord. I'm speaking also of a way of living, whereby Jesus is part and parcel of the whole thing. Are you welcoming Jesus into your life each day, each moment, in each situation, in each relationship? This is what he wants, and for this we were created.

He Knows Your Name

The fact that Jesus addressed Zacchaeus by name, is a big deal. He was "Zacchaeus," a man with a name. Moreover, from Jesus' perspective, Zacchaeus wasn't just a hated tax collector, one who had betrayed his people and his friends to get rich by collecting taxes for Rome. No, Zacchaeus was a man in whom God was at work, and whose life God had plans to transform. Zacchaeus was a person with whom Jesus wanted to have intimate relationship, despite the conventions of his culture. By using the name Zacchaeus, Jesus touched the heart of the despised tax collector, and offered him God's mercy.

Christ calls you and me, not as part of a crowd or congregation, but personally. He knows your name, your situation, your sin, your fears, and your dreams. He knows everything about you. And he wants you, and you, and you, and me.

Today we have a choice, like Zacchaeus had a choice. We can welcome Jesus into our lives. Or we can hold him at arm's length. If we invite him in, there will be changes. I do know that if we welcome Jesus in our lives – as a whole, his mercy and his loving presence will transform us, and we'll never be the same.

This is the Word of God. Give thanks to God for his Word.
Amen!

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