

Last week I made the comment about the church hadn't had a minister retire in living memory (maybe longer) and I'd never done this before. I want to provide a small correction. As I read the Bible, I don't find any warrant for retiring from following Jesus. Not only that I've had and I have some great models before me in this community. So all I'm really talking about is a change of function and role; I trust I'll be following and serving Jesus all my days – as I see so many have done and are doing here.

From time to time I pray for Richard Dawkins, atheist in the extreme, and as I was being enthralled by the singing of Jerusalem and the Hallelujah chorus last Sunday afternoon at the RSA concert, the thought crossed my mind that Richard Dawkins lacks imagination. He's not able to consider that God may exist beyond that which he can explain and understand scientifically.

As my spirit soared to the accompaniment of that great singing – and thanks to Ken, Mel, Paul, Cyril, Elaine and all the others – the other cellists, guitarists, drummer, piano and organ, the youth choir and soloists – I felt my faith affirmed and glory being given to God. If you weren't there you missed a treat - most of you missed a treat and an affirmation of your faith.

Remember we're going through a series of 'Jesus meets....' And I wonder how many you can remember.

Our text for today is from the very familiar story of Jesus and Zaccheus.

All week I've been thinking, this is so old hat, if you went to Sunday school you heard the story of Zacchaeus ad nauseum. You know the song – 'Zacchaeus was a wee little man.....'

And I thought I had a choice, I could read the passage, preach a tidy three point sermon and leave it at that – you'd possibly go away bored and certainly not challenged or lifted in your spirits.

So I thought, actually this happened, people like us were there, they saw, they reacted.

So let's enable this scene to come alive.

We need some disciples, Jesus, Zacchaeus, the crowd and a sycamore tree – I thought for the tree we'd get an aluminium ladder and I've got someone to be Zacchaeus. For the rest – you are the participants so we need a narrator, someone to be Jesus, a group of disciples, a crowd and an audience.

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'

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.'

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.'

Today's Gospel is the story of a most unlikely follower of Jesus. Having said that, this is really a story about Jesus; the one who calls, enlists, commandeers ordinary people and entrusts them with his kingdom; even someone as corrupt as Zacchaeus.

Jesus enters Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. There was a rich, disreputable man in Jericho named Zacchaeus. He was not only a tax collector — someone who fleeced his own people for money to pay their Roman overlords — but was the head of all tax collectors.

But something within Zacchaeus made him want to see Jesus when he and his followers made their way through town. In this sense he's not unlike Nicodemus (something in Nicodemus made him want to seek out and meet Jesus). I find this very encouraging as I mentioned about a couple of weeks ago; just to find the place in a person's life where they may be willing to respond.

So Zacchaeus scurried up a tree hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

To Zacchaeus' surprise (and to the horror of everybody else in town), Jesus sees Zacchaeus up the tree, addresses him, and invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house. The crowd, now transformed from those curious about Jesus to those infuriated by Jesus, shouts among themselves, **'He can't be a real Messiah. He's gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner!'**

The crowd (I guess that's us) is scandalized that Jesus should do such a thing. They regarded Zacchaeus as a loser on two counts: a collaborator with the Romans and a man who's rich. Luke is pretty rough on the rich just in case you'd never noticed...

As Jesus passes through Jericho, he enters only one home: the home of a despised rich man.

No sooner than the table is prepared than Zacchaeus says he will make restitution for all his ill-gotten gain. I came to the conclusion that he pulled off some shady deals and made money big time — maybe he was into the ancient equivalent of bitcoin, although I have to confess I don't really know what that is. (All I know is that Trudy for whatever reason, probably none, gets around 5-10 emails a day promising her riches beyond measure — bit coin is the latest. So far Trudy hasn't been sucked in). But deleting them all is a full-time job.

Now we go back to Zacchaeus.

Jesus makes a startling statement: Today, salvation has come to this household.

It's one of the few times that word salvation is used in the Gospels. Salvation—healing, rescue, being made right with God, restored to relationship with God—has come to a despised rich man.

'He too is a son of Abraham,' Jesus says. The man the community treated as an outcast is told by Jesus that he's one of their kin. Nice!

But who were the children of Abraham? Israel, of course, God's chosen. And what a sorry lot they were! Abraham himself was no model as a good husband or father. Jacob was a scoundrel. They were a decidedly mixed bag, the sons and daughters of Abraham. They were chosen by God, not because of their goodness but because of God's graciousness. And so are YOU! So am I! So are WE!

The Bible is a long story of how God sticks with these sinners, these children of Abraham. Time and again, when they stumble and fall, God returns to them, picks them up, and resumes the divine-human conversation.

And that's what's happened at Zacchaeus' house that day. Jesus was busy reclaiming the wayward, sinful sons and daughters of Abraham. He was reconstituting Israel. Jesus is doing here what he was doing all

through Luke's Gospel: seeking and saving the lost—this time saving the one who, because of his profession and his ill-gotten gains, had been lost but now is found.

And good church people, all you gathered here, please note: the crowd, the good-enough, synagogue-going, Scripture-believing, close-friends-with-God folk of Jericho, hated Jesus for it. 'He's gone [again!] to the house of a sinner!'

Jesus responded: 'Today, salvation has come to this household!'

Just for today, I want to define salvation as that moment or that process whereby Jesus comes to your place, invites himself to dinner at your table, and intrudes in your life. Who is a Christian? Let's say for today that a Christian is someone to whom Jesus has shown up uninvited.

That's a good thing to be reminded of. Christians are people to whom God in Jesus Christ has shown up. And among us today, some are good, righteous people. Some have a hard time acting like Jesus wants them to act. Some at times are hard to get along with. Some have possibly made their money in questionable ways. Some may have shady reputations.

The thing that makes them and us Christians is that Jesus somehow knows our names, somehow slips in despite our attempts to avoid him and comes to us, calls us to follow him, and he will continue to love and pursue us throughout all your days.

So who are you in this encounter?

Has Jesus encountered you as he encountered Zacchaeus?

Are you furious at some of the people you meet even here who don't conform to the way you think they should be

Do you judge Jesus because he turns up to see folks you think he should keep away from

Got to be honest here or we've wasted the day. This is not just a story lifted out of the pages of an ancient text, this is today, this is now and this is us!

Second Dialogue

Citizen: Hey Zacchaeus! I see you're up the tree again. What's your problem, I thought Jesus got you all sorted.

Zacchaeus: He did, but sometimes I like to sit in this tree and remember what Jesus did for me. I still remember the day he said he was coming to my house.

Citizen: Fair enough, but don't you think you have to look forward.

Zacchaeus: You're right, but I also sit here and think about how terrible my life was and would be in the future without him. It not only reminds me of what I've become but also what I was.

Citizen: Well why don't you come down from the tree and come to my place – I'd like to hear more about what Jesus did for you

PRAYER