

# Zacchaeus – transformed by love

Psalm 119:137-144  
2 Thess 1:1-4, 11-12

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Lk 19:1-10

He 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. So he ran ahead and climbed 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 happy to welcome him. 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."

Feel the sense of frustration and despair of the prophet as he waits but never sees, seemingly waiting in vain for justice while the wicked get their way and mock the humble. He cries out to God to just listen. Why don't you answer God, justice never prevails, the law becomes slack, meaningless. Look at what these people are doing and how they're treating us. Hear the anger in his voice.

Now let's move forward to the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was exactly the sort of person that Habakkuk cried out to God about. Because we're told that Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax collector, who were hated enough anyway; he was a chief tax collector. He would not only have ripped off the people with his sly ways, but he would have made money off the people who worked for him as well.

Chief tax collectors like Zacchaeus were known as tax farmers and they were people who were highly visible. They were known for stopping people on the road and demanding a portion of their goods. In the society of Jesus' day, tax farmers like Zacchaeus were known as the embodiment of dishonesty.

Athol Gill says that the tax collector is "one who collaborates with the Roman occupation forces and manages to make handsome profits from oppressing his neighbour, defrauding him whenever possible. In the literature of the day we're told that they were spoken of in the same light as robbers, swindlers, prostitutes, adulterers and murderers. They were known by the company they kept! Gill then says that their very occupation rendered them unclean and to obtain God's forgiveness was in the eyes of the people of that time very nearly impossible for a tax collector. Hans Kung also says that they were also seen as incapable of repentance simply because they couldn't remember how many they had cheated and how much they had swindled.

Against this backdrop, a hated and despised tax collector, we can get a glimpse of why it is that the people looking on were so disgusted that Jesus would actually single out this man and invite himself over to his house. Zacchaeus personified the arrogant, filthy rich, greedy, slime bag that Habakkuk cried out to God about a few hundred years before. And here is this guy Jesus, wanting to get to know him and spend time with him. Rabbis in those days regarded any house entered by a tax farmer to be unclean, so by inviting himself over to Zacchaeus' house, Jesus was entering into an unclean environment.

Obviously Jesus just didn't get it. Someone needs to tell him that he's missing something. Jesus obviously

doesn't realise who Zacchaeus is. If he really wanted to get known as the Messiah, someone needs to set him straight and just have a quiet word in his ear about the right way to do it. And besides, here he is claiming to be God, doesn't he know about the prophets of old who railed against people like Zacchaeus? This proves that Jesus isn't the Messiah; someone who is from God doesn't spend time with scumbags like Zacchaeus.

Now let's look at this passage from the point of view of Zacchaeus. The first thing that sticks out to me is that Zacchaeus was very keen to see Jesus. He'd obviously heard about Jesus, maybe already seen him speak elsewhere, and there was something about Jesus that made him want to know more; there was something that attracted him to Jesus, but maybe he wasn't quite sure what it was, but there was something there that he wanted. He ran ahead and climbed a tree; he was pretty set on seeing Jesus and probably grabbing his attention somehow.

Why was he keen to see Jesus? After all, Jesus constantly warned about the very things that Zacchaeus was doing in his life. Jesus warned about greed and the love of possessions, just the opposite of the sort of life that Zacchaeus was into. So why would he want to get the attention of Jesus? Because there was something niggling away at Zacchaeus' heart, something that wasn't satisfying anymore. The ripping off of people, the untold riches and probably the lack of many or any real friends or anyone who saw him as worthy of any trust at all, was something that he didn't want anymore. So if he could just get a look at Jesus and see more of what he was about, maybe he could follow him around for a while and learn what he needs to do to change his life.

So, imagine his disbelief when Jesus singles *him* out, sees him up in the tree and invites himself around to Zacchaeus' place for a while. This is better than his wild dreams. Jesus is coming over to my place! I mean, I didn't expect anything more than to hope to see Jesus, maybe ask him a few questions if I was lucky. I reckon Zacchaeus couldn't quite believe his good fortune, and more than that, he was completely floored by Jesus' acceptance of him as a person, despite what he had done with his life, and despite what he was still doing.

Despite all the muttering going on behind the scenes, and probably also quite out in the open about the fact that Jesus chose to spend some time with Zacchaeus of all people – I mean, you couldn't go much lower – just blew his mind. Why on earth would he accept me and above all, want to stay in my house? I could imagine that Zacchaeus may have been quite emotional at being completely accepted in the presence of this guy Jesus. He probably initially felt unworthy, just like Peter did earlier on when Jesus chose him out to become one of his disciples. Peter said go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man. Zacchaeus would have felt even more so, yet here is Jesus, willing to spend time with him and come to his house.

And the next thing we see is the total transformation of this dishonest, lying, cheat into a man of overwhelming generosity and humility. He realises that he doesn't have to cheat anymore. He doesn't have to lie to anyone ever again. The past is behind him. Salvation has indeed come. This was the day that God entered into his house and his heart and he was never going to be the same.

Look at the fruits of his change – he becomes generous, he thinks of others, he is honest, he wants to make amends for his past actions, and with interest.

After this incredible story, it almost seems like Jesus' statement at the end, that he came to seek out and save the lost, didn't need to be said. It was so clearly done in the life of Zacchaeus that day. So much so that Jesus even called Zacchaeus a son of Abraham. This would have been the final straw for the chief priests and the Pharisees. First Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house, but then how dare he refer to this criminal as a son of Abraham.

Now put yourself in the story, particularly in the place of Zacchaeus. Do you see yourself as the grubby back room deal maker, a liar and a cheat? Do you feel despised by the respectable people? Do you look in the mirror and can't even look yourself in the eye? Do you see yourself as a liar and a cheat because it's true, because you are a liar and a cheat? And do you have a nagging sense of not wanting to be like that anymore?

Now imagine Jesus looking up and saying, with a whole crowd of onlookers around, I want to stay with you today. He singles you out, of all people and wants to come to your place. It is for people exactly like you that Jesus came. Those considered to have no hope in the world are the very ones who are singled out by the grace and love of God. You don't have to be religious. Jesus' core group of disciples consisted of fishermen, tax

collectors and freedom fighters. There doesn't seem to have been a religious person among them.

He wants to come to your house today. You are accepted. It doesn't matter what you've done, how much you've stuffed up your life. You are a loved child of God. Salvation came to Zacchaeus' house – the embodiment of dishonesty and lies was completely transformed by the overwhelming, overflowing love of God. Jesus says he is a model disciple. We recognise our wretchedness and are overwhelmed by the undeserved, overflowing grace that God offers to all, without exception.

Every one of us wants to matter in life to others. The cry of the human heart is to matter. You can call it the search for meaning, or the search for significance. But it is the same in the heart of every person who has ever lived. We want to know that we matter. There is a song from about 20 years ago that says Love me love me is the human cry, love me love me never say goodbye.

Zacchaeus mattered to Jesus. His life was transformed because he mattered so much to Jesus that Jesus wanted to spend some quality time with this man who society spurned, who society said was a god-forsaken cheat with no hope of ever being anything good. Jesus responded to Zacchaeus' cry for significance. He went to Jesus because there was something in him that twiggged. Somewhere inside, a distant light went on which made him realise that what he was doing with his life just wasn't doing it for him anymore. And Jesus heard his heart cry and responded as he always does, with extravagant, completely over the top love and acceptance, despite all that Zacchaeus had done.

That's what the gospel is about. We've all stuffed up but God loves us anyway. We are the Zacchaeus of this story. We are the ones who have hurt people, who have lied and cheated. We all want to know that we matter. And to this cry Jesus responds – I want to come to your house today.

I want to finish with an old story from long ago. It's called 'The Old Violin'.

T'was battered and scarred and the auctioneer thought it scarcely worth his while,  
To waste such time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile.  
"What am I bid, good people," he cried "who'll start the bidding for me?  
A dollar? A dollar. Who'll make it two? Two dollars who'll make it three?  
Three dollars once, three dollars twice going for three," but no!

From the room, far back, a gray-bearded man came forward and picked up the bow.  
Then wiping the dust from the old violin, and tightening up the strings,  
he played a melody, pure and sweet, as sweet as the angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer with a voice that was quiet and low said,  
"What now am I bid for this old violin?" as he held it up with the bow.  
"One thousand? One thousand, do I hear two? Two thousand. Who'll make it three?  
Three thousand once, three thousand twice, going and gone!" said he.

The audience cheered, but some of them cried, "We just don't understand.

What changed it's worth?" Swift came the reply, "The touch of the masters hand."

And many a man, with life out of tune, all battered with bourbon and gin,  
Is auctioned cheap, to a thoughtless crowd, much like that old violin.  
A mess of pottage, a glass of wine, a game, and he travels on.  
He's going once, he's going twice, he's going and almost gone.  
But the Master comes and the foolish crowd never can quite understand,  
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought, by the Touch of the Masters Hand.

We come with nothing and he gives us everything. That's why he came, that's why he died. While we were still shaking our fist in his face, he died for us and our lives can be transformed and we will never be the same again.

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*4 November 2007*