

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 3 November 2013 (Year C – All Saints)
Isa. 1.10-18; Psalm 32.1-7; 2 Thess 1.1-4, 11-12; Luke 19.1-10

Jesus of Nazareth has the unerring knack of talking to the wrong people: women at wells, foreign women; Roman centurions; corrupt officials; women of questionable virtue. He tells stories about them, too: Samaritans who do the right thing when Jews do not; poor widows who give all that they can afford; tax collectors who pray for mercy with all their heart, as opposed to religious people who thank God out loud that they are decent, God-fearing men. His opponents cotton on to this very quickly. Why does he keep such bad company? Why does he enjoy eating and drinking with riff-raff? And today, in Jericho, he's up to his old tricks. On the way in, he has healed a blind man, so no wonder the crowds have turned out in such numbers, no doubt expecting more. Does he greet those who are cheering and calling out to him? No. His eye lights on a little man up a tree who has come to have a look but wants to keep his distance from everyone else.

Jericho is an oasis in the parched Judaeian wilderness where many trade routes meet, a place of rest and refreshment for weary travellers. It was a rich city, blessed with a good climate; a fine place to spend the winter, if you could afford it, among the date palms. But Jesus is simply passing through, before taking the steep road up through the mountains to Jerusalem. Zacchaeus runs a local business which collects taxes for the Romans, so he is not a popular man. He makes his living, as all such people do, by adding a few percent on to the money that is owed, and he has been remarkably successful. He is especially disliked by the more devout Jews because usury – charging interest – is forbidden by the Law. We don't know why he was so keen to catch a glimpse of Jesus: perhaps he simply wants to gawp at this visiting celebrity before going back to gloat over his profits. We do know, though, that he is short in stature and the crowds are dense. He may get trampled on if he tries to push through them. So why not climb a tree and watch the fun from there?

Seated in his leafy retreat the last thing he is expecting is that Jesus will notice him and even less that he will invite himself to stay. There are hundreds of people who would have paid good money to offer hospitality to this famous teacher and healer and

who would consider themselves much worthier of his company. But no: Jesus always talks to the wrong people and down Zacchaeus comes, quickly and, we are told, happy to welcome him. And as he comes down from the tree so the story of his raising up begins. All the disappointed dignitaries grumble: 'he has gone to be the guest of a sinner'; unlike themselves, of course. This simple gesture of Jesus towards a man who was judged unworthy by everyone else unlocks something in the heart of the little man. In an expansive gesture of generosity, he gives half his estate to the poor and promises to repay anyone he has cheated at a rate twenty times that prescribed by the Law. That reaching out across social and religious barriers, so characteristic of Jesus, does the trick. There is no miracle, except, of course, there is, because Zacchaeus has been released from the prison in which he lived – both his own greed and the disapproval of society – and has discovered that he can live in the same generosity of spirit as that showed to him by Jesus.

I find this encounter fascinating. There are many people today who are attracted to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth for exactly the reasons we see in this story, but who find the massive scaffolding of ritual and belief built around him by the Church impossible to accept. So they keep at a safe distance. They may not believe in God or in God as Trinity or Christ as both human and divine; they may find it repugnant to believe in hell and hard to believe in heaven; their ideas have been influenced by the onward march of science and they would rather celebrate the gift of life and the possibilities of forgiveness and fresh beginnings in the here and now. Yet here, in this story, Jesus is clear that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus, who has as much right to be a son of Abraham as any pious believer. Salvation has not come to him by manipulating his emotions, and the drama of Cross and Resurrection lie as yet in the future. Salvation arrives in a simple but life-changing gesture which speaks of the worth of an individual who knew he was not very good, and it expresses itself by a change in the whole moral basis of his life. He has been accepted by this great teacher, and this releases in him gifts he never knew he had, of care for the poor and restitution for those he has wronged.

All too often the Church gives the impression that to be touched by the life of Jesus you must sign up to all the doctrines or be saved in a particular way or partake in the

correct rituals, but that is the wrong way round. This story is a good corrective. Jesus stretches out the hand of friendship to someone who had few friends and many enemies. In doing so he gently but firmly removed that invisible barrier which exists between people when we judge them or stereotype them, and a little miracle of resurrection took place. First comes the encounter with Jesus, in the words he speaks, the actions he does, the example he sets; and only as that encounter grows and deepens do questions of belief come into play, as the Gospels themselves record when people ask: 'Who is this man? How can he speak and act with such authority?' Christian doctrine should not be a straitjacket which imprisons us; it is a witness to the Christ who releases us from our prisons and who comes to us through locked doors.

Churches need to offer space like the tree into which Zacchaeus climbed, so that people who are attracted to the message of Jesus but have trouble with the language of religion can come to see Jesus as he passes by. One day they may hear him speak their name and invite himself to stay, and then they will not be bothered any more about watching from the sidelines, for they will come down to welcome him as best they can, and their own miracle of resurrection will begin. Curiosity can lead us into the most unexpected places. I bet it never occurred to Zacchaeus for a second as he settled on the most comfortable branch he could find that his life would never be the same again; and all because Jesus came to stay in his house. When church people think of mission they think of schemes and programmes and maybe stirring sermons. No doubt they have their place. But this story tells us that the simple hand of friendship extended to someone who knew he was neither popular nor honest and had only come to gawp is enough to do the work of God. Zacchaeus believed he was condemned to be an outsider, Jesus but Jesus knew better. I wonder what kind of dinner they shared with Jesus that night. I bet there was laughter and joy in the air.

At the Lord's Supper that same invitation comes to us, as Love bids us welcome to sit at the table of Jesus. I think we all know the restorative power of a good meal shared with family and friends. We often lament its passing from family life. There is something sacramental about all our table fellowship; a potential for deepening relationships and increasing love, even if tempers sometimes get frayed. At table, over food and drink with others, we learn about connectedness; how we are not

isolated individuals, but bound to the lives of others. Zacchaeus's job meant that he was despised by his fellow-Jews in Jericho and he had got used to being regarded as a pariah. It had its financial compensations, but they did not make up for his sense of exclusion from community. By calling him by name and inviting himself to stay Jesus broke through that wall of separation, for that is his way, that is the truth he lived by, that is the life he brings, to anyone who feels they have been shut out in the cold: 'For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.' Not the self-satisfied and those who think that they have made it; he came to look for those who for whatever reason could only ever listen from the outside to the sounds of merriment within, and he came to invite them home to God. And that is what salvation means.

We need to be better at connecting the kind of supper Jesus enjoyed with Zacchaeus and the meals we enjoy in the company of those close to us, with the Supper we share every other week within these walls. I do not mean so much that we should make it more like a family meal as that we should not think of everyday life as divided from sacramental living. The point of sacraments is that they are earthed; without water, there is no baptism; without wheat and grapes and human industry, there is no Eucharist, no thanksgiving meal. They are earthed because Christianity, with its doctrine of the Incarnation, is an earthed and earthy faith. You do not escape into fantasy worlds or float off into spiritual realms in order to be free of the material world. You embrace the material world, as God in Christ embraced it in order to restore it to wholeness.

When we eat and drink together at home we often tell stories, and when we eat and drink in the company of Jesus we do likewise, only it is a story which is the song of our salvation. When Zacchaeus dined with Jesus that same music was in the air. When we dine with him, the many strands of that song are drawn together, as we give thanks for the gifts of creation, acknowledge our brokenness, and are nourished outwardly by tokens of bread and wine and inwardly by that love which will not let us go; not when we watch from a safe distance; not when it is itself subjected to torture, trial and death. We are, if Madonna will pardon the borrowing (and how often have I quoted *her?*), material people who live in a material world, and we are at our most spiritual when we connect the two. Zacchaeus came down from his perch to welcome

the Jesus who had taken him completely by surprise, and as he landed on the ground so he took his first steps to heaven. We need that kind of connection. We need it in the way we treat our planet; in the way we treat one another; and in the way we treat ourselves. It was, after all, a leap of faith that turned the life of Zacchaeus around. I do not mean an irrational step which flies in the face of all the evidence. That is not what faith is. I mean a leap of faith, down from the safety of the tree, which responded to the hand of friendship Jesus stretched out to him and not in words only but also in deeds. That's always the danger, and the hope, when we eat in the company of Jesus.