

With Zacchaeus

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- [0 : 0 0] Something significant happened to me in mid-May. You might not have noticed, but I became, and it felt like it was overnight, the shortest person in my household.
- ! And so it is my great privilege to speak to you about Zacchaeus, famous short man of scripture. I love this story. It's a Sunday school classic, but classics are classics for a reason, aren't they?
- So, Meals with Jesus, and Anne's right, we're told that Jesus stays at Zacchaeus' house, and I guess I presume that he has a meal there, but we're not told that by Luke. And I'm going to look at kind of, I don't know if you call them themes, but three kind of ideas in this passage. I think it was the way, when I was preparing, of putting myself into the account.
- The first one is on the road. Jesus is on a journey. We're told at the beginning that he's passing through Jericho. That's because actually he's heading for Jerusalem on his last journey there.
- What does that tell us about Jesus' purpose and mission? Up the tree. I think that's self-explanatory. Why does a grown man climb a tree?
- [1 : 2 6] What is Zacchaeus' intent, and how does Jesus respond to him? Behind the door. The inspiration for this series was Revelation chapter 3.
- Here I am. Here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.
- So, there's not a literal door, but there's that metaphorical door. How do we invite Jesus into our lives? So, on the road.
- We're in Luke chapter 19, which is towards the end of what is sometimes called Luke's travel narrative. That's from Luke chapter 9, right through to Luke chapter 19.
- It's a really big chunk of Luke's gospel. Jesus spends the early part of Luke's gospel ministering in Galilee, but at the end of Luke chapter 9, he sets off resolutely on a journey to Jerusalem.
- [2 : 3 1] As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. That's chapter 9, verse 51.
- And on this journey, he goes initially into Samaria, comes out of Samaria. He's here in Jericho, so he's really right towards the end of the journey. Later in chapter 19, he's going to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.
- That's the end of this chapter that we're in today. I love a good road trip. At university, I actually studied a module that was called The Importance of the Road Trip in Post-War Hollywood Cinema.
- I love books about journeys, The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings. I love those narratives. I love going on a journey. I like walks, but I don't like circular walks, because what's the point of that?
- And I love a good road trip. One of the road trips which we have often taken as a family is the drive from London to Whitby on the Yorkshire coast.

[3 : 37] First, Google Maps optimistically thinks that it takes five and a half hours. But we are slow travellers. We stop frequently.

On one such journey, we set off early, and we've been on the road for, I kid you not, it was 30 minutes, where everyone felt either sick or hungry. So we stopped, and I think Rob might remember this better.

I think it was in Hammersmith, which is not on the route to Whitby. It's the wrong direction. And we spent, I tend to exaggerate, but I think we spent an hour and a half in McDonald's in Hammersmith.

And when we got back into the car, one of the kids said to me, are we nearly there? And I said, no, we're nowhere. We haven't left London. In the same way, some biblical scholars are frustrated by Jesus's journey to Jerusalem.

This journey seems to take too long. Jesus initially sets off, I've got a map, in the wrong direction. He sets off through Samaria, which is a really dangerous route.

[4 : 47] And he meets opposition in Samaria, and he has to reroute. So he's coming, I know you can't see this very well, he's coming from the top down. It's Samaria where he does an about turn.

We're not totally sure this is the route, because it's been really hard to plot and to work out. It's a suggestion of the route that he takes. Some gospels suggest he doubles back at the end of his journey, making several trips to Bethany, which is where his close friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus live.

Well, as you know, if you like travel narratives, sometimes the journey isn't about the destination, it's about the journey. It's less about the geography of where you're going than about the personal transformation.

And Jesus actually states his purpose clearly in this chapter of Luke's gospel. He says right at the end that he is here to seek and save the lost.

And it reminded me a bit of the shepherd seeking a lost sheep. I didn't know we were going to sing that song earlier. If you mapped a shepherd searching for a sheep on a plan, it wouldn't look very direct.

[6 : 04] But it is purposeful in intent, isn't it? Even if it's not the geographically direct route. So maybe this is not a route determined by the landscape, rather a route determined by the location of the lost people who need saving.

The detour in Samaria takes Jesus past the woman at the well. One of his backtracks near Bethany is because he needs to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Some of this journey feels incidental, but it's not accidental. So Luke has set the scene. 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. Chris did a very helpful introduction to tax collectors at the start of this series when he was talking about Levi.

Tax collectors in biblical time weren't just frustrating bureaucrats. They were traitors to the Jewish people.

[7 : 15] They implemented the tax system of the oppressor, the Roman authorities. And they were also corrupt because they were making their money by taking an illegal cut of these profits.

And we're told that Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector. It feels like an introduction for a pantomime baddie. There feels like there's no uncertainty about the morality of this man.

But we are here in Jericho. And it reminded me of that other biblical sinner from Jericho, Rahab the prostitute. And we hear about her in the Old Testament book of Joshua.

Rahab begins when Joshua's spies find her. She's working as a prostitute. But she ends up as a matriarch in the bloodline and ancestry of Jesus.

And as we will see, again, God is working out a salvation plan to bring transformation to this life. By the end of the passage, Zacchaeus is changed inwardly and outwardly.

[8 : 25] And he's given a new identity. And as I think we know well, Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming to town.

And he climbs and runs ahead to climb a sycamore tree. And we are told that this is because he is short and he wants to see Jesus.

So it's many years, actually, since I climbed a tree. I did think of doing some experimental research. But I thought maybe for a moment, maybe the same for you, that it's been a while since you were up a tree.

So I wonder if we can take a minute to perhaps remember a tree that you once climbed. Maybe you can imagine sitting at the top of it.

When I think of this, I remember a tree at the bottom of my garden in Huddersfield, which I would sit in age about seven and wait to be called in for tea.

[9 : 29] And when I remember sitting in that tree, there are two feelings that come to mind. I don't know if any of you thought this. The feeling of being able to see for miles around you.

It feels like miles around you, doesn't it? Particularly when you're small. So Jesus also climbs the tree because he wants the vantage point. He wants to see Jesus. But also, I remember being in a tree and feeling hidden from view.

Did anyone have that feeling? Going in a tree and you think that no one can see you. You're hidden. And the gospel accounts are quite fast-paced.

But sometimes we have these brilliant bits of detail. So we're told that it's a sycamore tree. And actually, in the translation and read, we have a newer translation.

And we now know that it's a sycamore fig tree. This is one for Gardeners World fans. Because I always thought of the sycamore tree like a sycamore maple tree.

[10 : 31] You know, with those distinctive leaves that you get on maple syrup. But actually, this would have been like a fig tree with these really distinctive big leathery fig leaves and fruit.

They're very large trees, the sycamore fig. So when I imagine Zacchaeus climbing this sycamore fig tree, he does it because he wants to see Jesus.

But I imagine that he's partially concealed by these leaves that look like fig trees. And this, for me, felt like a bit of a familiar feeling.

Wanting to see Jesus. Wanting to be close to Jesus. But perhaps not wanting Jesus to take a close look at me. And it reminded me also of Adam and Eve sewing the fig leaves together in Genesis chapter 3 to hide their nakedness.

And this feeling of not wanting to be seen. I sometimes think of that feeling as shame. Shame isn't a sin, but something that can come about as a result of our sin.

[11 : 41] All the sins that people have done against us. Or feeling of not living up to the expectations of others. Shame makes you want to hide and it can stop you from getting help.

In Genesis, it's God who calls out to Adam and Eve. Where are you? When they are hiding. It's not a geographical question.

He doesn't need their coordinates. It's a spiritual question. Where are you in relationship with me? And when Jesus sees Zacchaeus, it's Jesus again who bridges that gap.

He sees Zacchaeus' desire to be close to him, but also perhaps his shame. And he calls out, Zacchaeus, come down immediately.

I must stay at your house today. The acceptance of Jesus removes Zacchaeus' shame. Just like God overcomes Adam and Eve's shame by making them the fig leaves in the garden.

[12 : 46] It's the beginning of the salvation plan. So as I said, the inspiration for this series came from Revelation chapter 3.

Here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person. And they with me.

And this is the subject of a famous painting by the pre-Raphaelite artist William Holman Hunt. It's a very famous Victorian painting of Jesus.

In this painting, the door is overgrown and it doesn't have a handle on the outside. Because whether we open the door is up to us.

Holman Hunt said it represented the obstinacy of the human mind, which I love, as an idea. But it strikes me loud looking at this painting of Jesus on the doorstep knocking, that Jesus is persistent.

[13 : 50] He stands at the door and knocks. He's also the running father and the shepherd in search of the lost sheep. Jesus knocks persistently.

He does not stand on ceremony. In Zacchaeus' account, Jesus practically invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. When Zacchaeus is still stuck up a tree, Jesus bridges the gap because he wants to be involved and welcome in our lives.

I don't know how you feel about unexpected visitors. If you call me and say that you'll be around in 10 minutes, I will spend that 10 minutes bleaching the toilet, clearing the stuff off the sofa, doing the washing up, straightening the cushions.

But Jesus is standing at the door knocking. He needs us to make a choice. Because actually there are also stories in the Gospels, accounts in the Gospels of people who miss their chance.

Jesus doesn't want us to wait until we have sorted out the mess of our lives on our own. Jesus wants to come in so he can help us.

[15 : 11] Zacchaeus' story has the happiest of endings. He must be one of Scripture's most joyful givers. I think as you read it, you can feel the joy dripping off the page.

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 anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.

We're not told whether Jesus says anything to Zacchaeus over dinner to make him give his wealth away. We are not told that he does.

I like to think that Zacchaeus' heart changed at the moment Jesus calls him by name and invites him into his home. Because what price would we put on being known and loved by Jesus?

It made me think of the parables of the treasure and the pearl. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field.

[16 : 22] When a man found it, he hid it again. And then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

What price do we put on being part of God's kingdom? It's surely worth everything that we have. It's a pearl of great price.

As a result of Zacchaeus' desire for Jesus and his generosity, he is given a new identity. He is no longer the chief tax collector, the chief sinner of Jericho, but he's the son of Abraham.

In some ways, it's a strange thing to say to someone who is Jewish. But I think Jesus is saying, you no longer become part of my family by your birthright.

Zacchaeus becomes part of Jesus' family because he opens the door to Jesus. He belongs to God's family and like Rahab before him, he becomes part of God's great story of salvation.

[17 : 34] For the son of man came to seek and save the lost. So what about us?

Are you up the tree? Are you lost? Are you stuck in a tree and you are looking for a way down or out?

Jesus is the one who can rescue you. Can you reach out to him today? Are you behind the door?

Do you know Jesus? Maybe you've known him for a while, but you've left him standing on the doorstep. Maybe you can see him there on your ring doorbell for your letterbox.

Maybe it's because you feel unworthy to let him in. Or maybe you feel you're doing okay without him. Jesus is standing at the door knocking.

[18 : 36] Is today the day you open it and invite Jesus into your life? It's time to put down the scatter cushions and let Jesus in.

Are you on the road? Are you on a journey with Jesus? And have you travelled this road for a long time? But does it sometimes feel frustrating like you're going round in circles?

Do you sometimes think, are we nearly there? Maybe you've lost a sense of your purpose? Or maybe you've lost hope that Jesus knows where he's going.

Today is the day that God sent his spirit to empower his people for mission. To fill them with hope after the despair of Jesus' death.

So come Holy Spirit and fill us afresh so we can finish that journey. And as Jesus leaves Jericho for the last time and he heads on towards Jerusalem, we are reminded of just how costly this journey will be for him.

[19 : 48] It ends at the cross. But what is that worth to us? Surely it is a pearl of great value. A treasure that is worth all we have.