

Sermon for 30th October 2022 – Geoff Oates.

Luke 19 v 10 - For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost

Have you ever been lost? Seriously, hopelessly lost? When the streets all look the same but none of the street names match what it says in your directions? Or when the geographical feature the map promised you when you hiked over the next ridge isn't there? Or when the clouds come down so low and thick that you can't see any features at all?

Maybe in these days of SatNavs and GMS coordinates, it's getting harder to get lost. But it was a lot easier in my father's day, and I will share a story he told me about his early teaching days, not so long after the end of the 2nd world war, when Britain still had rationing, life was hard, everything was in short supply except, happily, army surplus camping equipment.

My father led countless more or less enthusiastic schoolboys on hiking holidays through the Yorkshire and Durham Pennines.

Dad would tell me fondly of one late Autumn expedition way up in the northern Dales when weather came down that was exceptional even for that wild and rain-swept corner of England. In thick low cloud, a troop of lads took the wrong turn off a ridge and lost their way. When it drew dark, they pitched camp and had a safe if rather damp night. In the early morning light they encountered a farmer and discovered they were many miles from their intended destination, and with some difficulty transport was arranged to get them back to base, where there had been much worry and anxiety.

But the boys themselves seemed utterly unconcerned about the whole incident. They had followed a path alongside a stream down a valley, as their map showed them, but of course when everything is in cloud one high valley in the fells looks pretty much like another, and they assumed all was well. Had they been frightened? Were they relieved to have been rescued and brought to safety? 'No,' they the boys replied. 'We didn't know we were lost until someone came and found us!'

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I wonder when it was that Zacchaeus realised he was lost.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. You had a tax collector in Alan's sermon last week, but he was in a parable, a teaching story. This is an incident drawn from life. Zacchaeus isn't just a tax collector, he's a chief tax collector.

A lot of people get brief, walk on parts in the Gospel story, but not many of them get a name. Perhaps he was so important that people knew and remembered his name. Zacchaeus, like so many ancient names, has a meaning. Ironically, it means 'innocent' or 'pure'! No doubt that name expressed all his parents' hopes for him when he was born.

Let's check our biblical co-ordinates here. Where does Zacchaeus work? Jericho. About 25 miles east of Jerusalem, on the Jordan Valley trade route that in ancient times went all the way from Syria to the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea. The Jericho area also did a lively

business exporting balsam, so scholars speculate that Zacchaeus may actually have been a senior customs official collecting duties on the traders as they passed through Judaeen territory.

But whatever his job, he's a rich man. So we're in Jericho, an easy two days' walk from Jerusalem, and we are at the start of Chapter 19 of Luke's Gospel. What happens at the end of Chapter 19? Palm Sunday! Jesus, the great Rabbi, perhaps the Messiah, travelling with his host of Galilean pilgrims to the Passover feast, is nearly at the capital. Something big is about to happen!

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A cynical commentator might suggest that Zacchaeus, the very epitome of the privileged establishment, sensed that regime change was on the cards and maybe it would be a good idea to make some new friends before it was too late.

I'm not so cynical. There's a lovely line drawing in my Good News Bible of a crowd lining a road, and a short man standing behind them, seeing only their backs, ignored and on the outside. Perhaps he realised then that his life, for all its wealth, had placed him outside his own nation, in exile in his own city, and he wanted to come home.

He must have made an odd sight, a senior civil servant scrambling up into a tree to catch a glimpse of the passing celebrity. But the important thing is not that he saw Jesus, but that Jesus noticed him, perhaps recognising in that desperate, potentially humiliating act a seed of faith that Jesus could bless and bring to fruition.

There is no beating of breasts, no wailing plea for forgiveness, and no condemnation. Jesus simply calls to Zacchaeus and invites himself for supper. In Jewish culture there was no more powerful expression of acceptance and reconciliation than to share a meal together.

And there is something wonderfully cool and pragmatic about Zacchaeus response. He knows exactly where he needs a change of heart. "I'll give half my wealth outright, and everything I have obtained dishonestly, four times over. Is that alright Jesus?". And Jesus says 'yes, salvation has come to this house' – it's door is open, community and hospitality can now thrive there.

Zacchaeus the sinner is once again Zacchaeus the pure, the innocent. All that his human parents, all that his heavenly father intended for him from his creation. He is acknowledged again as a Son of Abraham, which in truth he always was. He has returned to the family.

I didn't know I was lost, until someone found me.

There are many patterns of salvation set out for us in the Gospel stories, indeed throughout our Bible and outside it. Zacchaeus might be the one that speaks to you. In an age when war, fuel poverty, environmental stress and economic instability call us to question ever more urgently how we share the whole wealth of God's world, perhaps it should say something to all of us. Jesus calls for change in heart. He may also invite himself for dinner – and he'll leave the door open behind him, for others who also needs our hospitality.

Zacchaeus was in the wrong place, following the wrong compass, but unable to see how far away he was from home and safety. Until Jesus turned up, and led him to a complete change of heart.

Face to face with Jesus, you find out where you ought to be. And in his grace, he'll take you there.

Amen