

**Sermon preached by Professor John Vickerman October 30, 2022,
4th Sunday before Advent**

Readings: Isaiah 1. 10-18; 2 Thess. 1. 1-12; Luke 19. 1-10

- Zacchaeus was a very little man
And a very little man was he
He climbed up into a sycamore tree
For the Saviour he wanted to see
And when the Saviour passed that way
He looked up into the tree
And said, "Now, Zacchaeus, you come down
For I'm coming to your house for tea"
- It's a rather twee children's song, but isn't it a wonderful story? I think it encompasses the essence of the Gospel.
- Here was this tax collector, actually chief tax collector - an important collaborator with the occupying power.
- He had heard of Jesus, perhaps heard tell of his miracles, heard of his radical teaching of love.
- He wanted to see who he was.
- Problem - Zacchaeus was a very little man and there was a great crowd around Jesus, as a collaborator the people did not like him, so would not let him through.
- A man of initiative though - he runs ahead of the route he thinks Jesus is taking and climbs a sycamore tree.
- I don't suppose tax officials usually climb trees! He really wanted to see Jesus!
- Jesus and the crowd move along and arrive close to the sycamore tree.
- For some reason Jesus stops and looks up. I expect Zacchaeus nearly fell out of the tree.
- Jesus addresses Zacchaeus by name, how did he know?
- Hurry, come down out of that tree, I want to spend time with you in your place, I want to be with you.
- How utterly wonderful, Jesus the incarnation of the God of love wants to spend time with this little man, wants to have tea with him!
- Zacchaeus didn't waste any time - he hurried down and welcomed Jesus into his home with joy.
- Of course, there were the critics. We are told ALL who saw Jesus go into Zacchaeus' home grumbled. What is this religious teacher doing wanting to be a guest of an exploitive collaborator, a sinner.

- Everyone knows that religious teachers should recognise and avoid sinners - an attitude still to be found today!
- But we know that Jesus specialises in loving sinners. He says the Son of Man has come to seek and save those who are lost.
- Those who know they are despised, those who long for love, those who suspect they cannot make it themselves.
- The result is that Zacchaeus was so overwhelmed by Jesus presence that he spontaneously offered to give half of his possessions to the poor and repay 4-fold any fraudulent charges of tax he had made.
- The presence of God's unconditional love in Zacchaeus' home transformed all that was important to Zacchaeus.
- Zacchaeus had just been curious, he had just wanted to know who Jesus was, but Jesus wanted to be with Zacchaeus in his home and to show the love he had for him. That love turned Zacchaeus' life around totally.
- Sam Wells, Rector of St Martin's in the Fields and prolific Christian writer has argued that the most important word in the Bible is 'with' and the Bible is primarily an account of God's developing relationship with his creation and human beings.
- The God of love deepest desire is for us to know his presence with us in all of life.
- Jesus wanted to be WITH Zacchaeus not because Zacchaeus was good, he wasn't, or wealthy which he was, but because Zacchaeus was Zacchaeus and he was loved by God.
- It is so interesting, Jesus did not say to Zacchaeus, if you give you possessions away and restore what you have defrauded then I will come to your house. You must be good if you are going to be my friend! No Jesus was just WITH Zacchaeus and that love transformed him.
- Earlier in the previous chapter there is an account of mothers bringing their babies to Jesus for his blessing and the disciples had tried to discourage them. Jesus was appalled, he said unless you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- Just like babies there is nothing Zacchaeus or you or I can do to earn God's love.
- Sadly, very quickly the church stopped thinking that was quite right.
- Surely we have to **do** something religious to merit God's approbation and love.
- The passage we read from Isaiah shows how religious institutions right down the ages have thought like that.
- The Jewish community got into thinking that if the right sacrifices were made on the right days in the right liturgical fashion that was what was required for God to value and love them.

- They fell into the habit of separating the way they lived, which frequently involved exploiting the poor and the vulnerable, from their religious observances. As long as those were done correctly God would be satisfied.
- Today we can think that we can earn God's approbation if the performance of the liturgy is correct, and we believe most of the Creed and get our doctrine of the Trinity right, and understand correctly what Jesus was doing when he died on the cross.
- This attitude has infected the Church down the ages, and today the idea is still prevalent that God's approval, and that of fellow Christians, and even their love are dependent on personal belief and religious behaviour.
- This thinking so easily leads to guilt and the fear that I am not good enough for God to love me, and I have to earn his love.
- NO - That is blasphemy. The Eucharist that we will share in shortly tells us that the incarnate God died to bring us his free unconditional love. There is nothing you can do to earn it or even to be unworthy of it.
- While Jesus' love for Zacchaeus did not depend on him doing the right thing, the consequence of that love resulted in Zacchaeus spontaneously and joyfully wanting to right the wrongs he had committed, and beyond that to give half of his wealth to the poor.
- The love of Jesus flowed out through Zacchaeus to those who needed that love.
- At that time there was an enormous divide between the rich and poor, as is sadly increasingly happening today even in our society. The vast majority lived a subsistence life. Families could barely feed their children.
- Jesus had a primary concern and love for the poor and vulnerable. Remember the rich young ruler was told to sell his possessions and give to the poor.
- Zacchaeus' experience of Jesus love led him to do this joyfully.
- We are told in the book of Acts that the early Church was characterised by just such love. Those who were in need were supported by those who were blessed with enough.
- Our reading from the letter to the Thessalonians shows how the Christian communities were known for their love for one another.
- Although there are Christian communities that are characterised by love for each other, sadly that is not the characteristic that immediately comes to mind as we think of the Church today.
- We live in a society and world in which there are great disparities of wealth and wellbeing.

- At a time when our government has reduced international aid to less than 0.5% of our GDP, millions in Bangladesh and Pakistan that have lost their homes in the recent floods, and are starving.
- Because of the paucity of this country's welfare provision 3.9 million children in this country live in poverty (that is 8 in a class of 30). Headteachers and food aid charities are struggling to cope with families who are unable to afford food.
- If a few of our billionaires and corporations, like Zacchaeus would give half of their wealth to support and help the poor, their suffering would be greatly relieved.
- But what of us who know God's love for us in Christ? As food prices go up and power charges escalate,
- Does that love drive us to lobby the government to restore the international aid budget to support the countries devastated by floods, or to increase the welfare provision such that none of our fellow citizens go without food?
- More directly personally, and nearer to home, are we moved by that love to seek to help support to those in and outside our Christian community who find difficulty in keeping warm and putting food on the table?
- The apostle John reminds us, 'Herein is love not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son into the world that we might live through him.'
- Jesus came into the world to show unconditional love to us.
- As we share the bread and wine together may we be moved to share that love with our world and those around us.
- Amen