LUKE 19:1-10

Our story today takes us to Jericho. As you may know, Jericho is still an inhabited city in Israel, in the disputed West Bank, and is home to about 20,000 Palestinian Arabs. A few interesting factoids for you: it sits well below sea level and is the lowest permanently inhabited site on earth and one of the oldest cities on earth. In fact just last year Jericho celebrated its 10,000th birthday. Of course, no-one knows exactly when Jericho was founded, but archeologists think it's about that old.

As you all know, Jericho famously appears in the book of Joshua, when Joshua leads the people of Israel in capturing the city by marching around it and blowing their trumpets. But by the time we get to the year 30 AD or thereabouts, Jericho has changed hands a few times. Alexander the Great had it for a while, Mark Antony gave it to Cleopatra as a gift, and by the time of this story it's become part of the Roman Empire. Herod the Great had built aqueducts, a fortress, a winter palace, and a hippodrome. No, that's nothing to do with hippos, it's for chariot races.

Jericho had also become a customs point for goods coming to and from Jerusalem. This was where you stopped to pay your import and export taxes. It was perhaps the Geneva of its day; a key centre of commerce and trade. And we're told that Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way south to Jerusalem.

Then Luke introduces us to Xaqqias, who he tells us is the chief tax collector. Now according to the commentaries, this title doesn't appear anywhere else in the New Testament, but it's probably safe to assume that the "chief tax collector" in a regional tax center is doing all right. It probably means that he got a share of the revenues whether they were collected by him or one of his underlings. In other words, Zacchaeus is no petty bureaucrat. He's a senior partner in a highly lucrative enterprise.

And as you've probably heard before, tax collectors didn't win many popularity contests. They were, after all, collecting taxes for the Romans, so were seen as collaborators with a foreign occupying force. And if that wasn't bad enough, they took advantage of their position to line their own pockets. The verb translated "defrauded" in this passage, according to the commentaries, means "extortion through intimidation." In other words, Zacchaeus was running a racket. He was corrupt. So it's worth bearing in mind as we go through this story that you and I would probably not have liked Zacchaeus. We would have thought he was completely lacking in any kind of principle, a man who was just out for his own enrichment, and didn't care what he had to do or who he had to trample to get there. And Luke tells us in verse 2: he was rich.

Now, if you've been reading your way through Luke, if you've been one of the crowd following Jesus along, the fact that Luke tells us that Zacchaeus is rich should be setting off alarm bells in your head. Because in the previous chapter Luke tells us the story of the rich young ruler, of which the punchline is Jesus' pronouncement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. And lo and behold, just 20 verses later, here's another rich man.

Now *we* know how this story ends, but imagine that you are one of the disciples traveling with Jesus, you were there when he made the comment about needles and camels, and you're probably thinking to yourself, "Ah, a rich man. I think I know how this is going to go." But as you and I know, this story turns out very differently. And as we go through it, I want you to compare Zacchaeus with the rich young ruler, and you're going to see that their wealth is about where the similarity between these two characters ends.

The first difference is that Zacchaeus has a name. Luke didn't tell us the name of the rich ruler in the previous chapter. Now presumably he had a name, and presumably he had a well-known name; people tend to know the names of rich rulers. So why doesn't Luke tell us who he is? I don't think it was that Luke didn't know the guy's name, but that it wasn't important for that story. The point of the story was a theological one: the rich ruler comes to Jesus with a theological question.

But Zacchaeus comes for a very different reason, which we get in the very next verse. Verse 3: "And he was seeking to see who Jesus was." That's a fascinating comment, don't you think? Not that he was just seeking to *see* Jesus; he was seeking to see *who Jesus was*. Zacchaeus wasn't just playing spot-the-celebrity. He was curious about the man himself. You don't get the impression that the rich ruler is interested in actually knowing Jesus; he just wants his theological question answered. But Zacchaeus wants to know who Jesus is.

BUT, verse 3: "on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small of stature." It's fascinating reading Luke's gospel and seeing who gets easy access to Jesus and who his minders keep away. The disciples tried to keep the children from coming to Jesus. The crowd near Jericho told the blind beggar to shut up when he called out to Jesus. The rich ruler, however, just walked up to Jesus and spoke to him. He apparently had no trouble. He was rich, powerful, respected in society. He walked straight through. Now Zacchaeus doesn't even want to talk to Jesus. Luke just tells us he wants to see him, and yet can't because he's short.

Now, Zacchaeus was rich and short. I'm neither of those, but perhaps some of our more vertically challenged friends here today can sympathise with Zacchaeus. You've been in crowds, you know how difficult it is to crane your neck and still only be looking at people's armpits. Well, that's Zacchaeus. And it's not like he's the popular short guy who people are going to accommodate. You can imagine people maneuvering to block his way.

So what does Zacchaeus do? Verse 4: "He ran on ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way." Now I don't know if you know what a sycamore tree looks like. I didn't so I looked it up. Here's a picture. And you can see that climbing into this tree doesn't exactly require great agility. After all, a short tax collector is probably not the most athletic of people.

But the point is that we're so used to hearing this story that we can gloss over the fact that here we have a picture of a wealthy tax man climbing into a tree just to catch a glimpse of a poor itinerant preacher. Can you imagine a senior tax official, a wealthy businessman, climbing into a tree in his Armani suit just to catch a glimpse of a celebrity passing by? It's undignified. It looks desperate. And that's exactly what

Zacchaeus is: he's desperate to see this man. We don't know why exactly. We don't know what Zacchaeus has heard, or what in his life has brought him to this point, but he is throwing aside his dignity in his desire to see Jesus.

So Jesus comes along and sees Zacchaeus in the tree. And he addresses him *by name*. How does Jesus know Zacchaeus' name? We don't know, Luke doesn't tell us. Maybe he knew it because he was God, or maybe he heard other people insulting Zacchaeus, or maybe Jesus asked someone, "Hey, who's the short guy in the tree?" Whichever it is, it's not important, but what I think *is* important is that Jesus addresses him by name.

And not only does he address him by name, he then proceeds to invite himself round for dinner: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

See, what that says is that this is a *relationship*. There was no relationship between Jesus and the rich ruler. It was just a transaction, an exchange of ideas. But here we have Zacchaeus, on the one hand, desperate to see *who Jesus is*, and Jesus on the other calling Zacchaeus by name and inviting himself round to stay the night.

And just look at how Zacchaeus responds to what, after all, must have been a fairly startling incident. Verse 6: "he hurried down and received him joyfully." I can just imagine the look of shock on Zacchaeus' face suddenly turning to utter joyous astonishment as he scrambles down out of the tree to meet Jesus. But what a contrast with the rich ruler, whose face turned to dejection as he went away sad.

All of which has got me thinking about how you and I approach Jesus. When I first started going out with Linley I was desperate to be with her. I'd dream up any excuse to go round to her place and spend time with her. I couldn't stop thinking about her, I couldn't get enough of her. For women, you often experience that intensity with your children. Now, I'm not saying Jesus should be your boyfriend, but that there are relationships in our lives that we pursue with an intensity we don't give to Jesus.

I think new Christians often experience that intensity, but when you've been a Christian for a long time, and you've heard a thousand sermons and sung a million songs about how much you love Jesus, there is a tendency to start treating Jesus a bit like the garbage man: it's nice to know he's there even though you never really have anything to do with him.

How much do you actually want to see who Jesus is? How much do you want to be with him, in his word, in prayer with him, with his people? Are you desperate to know him? Do you want a relationship with him, do you want to be with him, or are you keeping him at arm's length? Is he just a "good teacher" for you, as he was for the rich ruler? Are you only interested in the exchange of ideas?

I think God wants more than that from us. He doesn't want to be an arm's-length God. He made us for relationship, and he's done everything in his power to make that relationship happen, but when we neglect that relationship, is it any wonder that we end up drifting away from him? Relationships take work, and if we're serious about our relationship with God, we need to devote ourselves to working hard at it.

The story goes on. Verse 7: “And when they saw it (that is, the crowd), they all grumbled.” Now, don’t fall into the trap of judging this crowd for not sharing in the bonhomie of the moment. Remember that Zacchaeus had proved himself over some time to be a money-hungry parasite of the worst kind. And here’s Jesus, the leader who some of them thought was going to liberate them from Roman rule, picking one person out of the crowd, and that person is a Roman collaborator. This would have been pretty hard to stomach for the fine upstanding God-fearing people of Jericho.

You see, the crowd is us. They’re the church people. The people with respectable jobs and respectable families and respectable homes. Why isn’t Jesus coming to my house? We’re nice people. But Jesus “has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And if the story ended there, maybe they’d be right. Jesus would be just another person out for himself, associating with the rich, hobnobbing with the wealthy.

But Jesus isn’t just going to Zacchaeus’ house for the free food and tax advice. Look at verse 8: “And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” Now, it’s difficult to know exactly where or when this takes place. Is this happening at the foot of the tree, or is it happening sometime later, at dinner, for example? Was there a conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus that we’re not privy to? We don’t know. It’s not clear, and it probably doesn’t matter. But what Luke wants us to know is that Zacchaeus has been radically transformed as a result of his encounter with Jesus.

Jesus *told* the rich ruler to distribute his wealth to the poor, and he went away sad. But here’s Zacchaeus *volunteering* to give half his money to the poor, and to pay back those he’s defrauded fourfold. According to Old Testament law, someone guilty of fraud was required to pay back the original sum plus 20 percent (Lev 6:5). But here’s Zacchaeus offering to pay back 400 percent! More than three times what he was required to do under Jewish law. In fact, the restitution Zacchaeus is offering is equivalent with what would be required if you stole an ox that you then sold or killed (Ex 22:1). He’s going way above and beyond what he’s required to do. And as if that weren’t enough, he’s giving half his money to the poor as well. See, this is not the grudging restitution of a naughty boy who’s been caught out. This is the full-blown, glorious power of God to change a person’s life completely.

Look how Jesus reacts. Verse 9: “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.” Why does Jesus say salvation has come, because Zacchaeus gave his money away? No, because giving his money away is the evidence of something much more profound. See, it wasn’t the rich ruler’s money that kept him from the kingdom of God, it was his *obsession* with money. But Zacchaeus has been *liberated* from the love of money. His grip on it has been loosened and its grip on him has been undone. And in its place is something so much more rewarding and enriching than a big bank balance could ever be: a life-changing relationship with God himself.

And in that sense, in the sense that Zacchaeus has thrown himself on the mercy of God, in the sense that he has surrendered his love of money and embraced a

relationship with the living God, Jesus says he has become a son of Abraham. He's become one of
God's children. I can't help thinking that's a little dig at the self-righteous, law-abiding, morally upright Jews who were calling Zacchaeus a sinner. Jesus is saying that Zacchaeus has become a true Jew – not one who just keeps the law, like the rich ruler who kept the commandments. Not just someone who's been circumcised, but someone whose heart has been circumcised.

You see, entering into a relationship with Jesus transforms Zacchaeus radically. In one day his greed and avarice has been replaced with abundant generosity. This is a completely new person. And these two stories, the rich ruler and Zacchaeus, illustrate so perfectly that Jesus didn't come just to be a teacher. Jesus is no self-help guru. He's not trying to get Zacchaeus to reach his potential. (And by the way, you will hear some Christian preachers telling you just that: Jesus wants you to reach your potential. I want to tell you that not only is that completely unbiblical, it's also a dangerous distortion of the gospel.) I don't think Jesus wants you to reach your potential, whatever that means. Jesus is in the business of changing people. He wants to transform you from someone who is obsessed with reaching your potential to someone who is obsessed with helping others. He wants to replace greed with generosity. He wants to replace grudges with forgiveness. He wants to replace envy with contentment. He wants to replace lust with love.

Imagine if Zacchaeus had come out after his encounter with Jesus and said, "I'm following Jesus now," but carried on the same. People would have hated him even more, because not only was he still an extortionist, he was a hypocrite to boot. How damaging it is to the cause of the gospel when the lives of Christians are no different to those of people around us.

As Wallace Benn showed us from Ephesians on the church retreat, we are to be people who are changed, people who live lives worthy of our calling, worthy of being called Christ-ians. And that's not about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. It's not about trying to be a better person, or making merit, or improving your karma, or following the five pillars or the four noble truths or the eightfold path or even the ten commandments. It's about throwing yourself, as Zacchaeus does, on the mercy of God. And when you do that, not only does he give you saving grace, washing away your sin and making you a new person, but he also gives you himself: God the Holy Spirit, his own presence with you, changing you day by day, transforming you into the person he wants you to be.

And then finally we get to the punchline. Verse 10: "For the son of man came to seek and save the lost." At the end of Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler, after he says that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples ask, "Then who can be saved?" To which Jesus replies, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." And here in the very next chapter is an example of what is possible with God: a rich man enters the kingdom of heaven.

God doesn't choose the people you and I would choose. He came to save the lost. He came to save the fraudulent tax collector. He came to save the prostitute. He came to save the pedophile. He came to save the war criminal. He came to save the copyright

thief. He came to save the workplace bully. He came to save the porn addict, the power addict, the career addict. He came to save you and me.

And there is no person God cannot save. Which means we should never give up on the people in our lives who we think are just too tough for God to crack. Don't limit God like that. The history of the church, starting with the Christian-killer Paul, is full of people who to you and me would have seemed the least likely people to put their trust in Jesus. But no-one is beyond God's reach. So don't give up. Keep praying, keep loving that person, keep living your life in a way that testifies to the power of Jesus, keep looking for opportunities to speak about him. For what is impossible with men – and women – is possible with God.

Amen.