

ENCOUNTER JESUS: ZACCHAEUS

(Luke 19.1-10)

Introduction

There's a story about a fitness club that was offering a £1,000 prize to anyone who could show that they were stronger than the manager. Here's how it worked. The boss was a great hulk of a man and he would squeeze an orange until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the orange to a challenger. Anyone who could squeeze out even one more drop of juice would win the money.

Many people tried; weightlifters, hod carriers, firefighters, front-row rugby players, vicars, professional wrestlers, and all failed to produce a single extra drop.

But one day this scrawny, weak-looking man signs up for the contest. A crowd assembles and the puny challenger steps up to the stage. After the laughter dies down, the owner grabs his orange and starts squeezing. When he's done, he hands this bone-dry pulverised ex-orange to the skinny challenger.

But the crowd's laughter turns to gasps as the man clenches his bony fist around the orange and six drops fall into the glass. The crowd goes wild, and the boss coughs up the prize money. He asks the little guy "What do you do for a living - lumberjack, builder, or what?" The guy just smiles and says, "Actually, I work for the Inland Revenue."

Background

Like the character in Luke's gospel today... It's one of the best-loved stories in the Bible; for years, children have sung songs in assemblies and Sunday school about Zacchaeus.

He lived in a place called Jericho, one of the oldest settlements in the world. It is called the city of palms because it's built around a spring of

water. **Slide 1** It's a garden city, surrounded by desert. It was also on a key trading route that connected Syria, Israel and Egypt - and because of its lushness and its location it was, and still is today, a prosperous place.

It's why Jericho was a major customs and excise post. You had to pay duty on anything you transported through that place. And because of that, it was in fact the tax capital of Israel in Jesus' day.

At that time of course the Romans were in charge – almost everywhere.

Slide 2 Their Empire stretched north/south from Hadrian's Wall to the Sahara Desert, and west/east from Portugal to the Caspian Sea. And it is well-known that they imposed heavy taxes.

Nobody likes paying tax. Not just Coffee Shop chains, and Internet multinationals. You don't want to pay more than you have to - and neither do I. But the Jews at this time hated paying it even more because these taxes propped up an arrogant government with pagan gods. **Slide 3**

Tax collectors did Rome's dirty work so everyone thought they were scum; fat cats ripping off their own people.

But no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. It doesn't matter who you are, what you've done, or where you've been. Jesus came to show that with God there is always a way back.

Zacchaeus - Before

What do we know about this particular tax collector Zacchaeus? Well, he wasn't just on the staff – v2 says he was a *chief* tax collector. Top dog of one of the three largest tax offices in the country. He gave orders to all the collecting agents in town and took a commission from them. **Slide 4**

Not surprisingly, he had become wealthy. He was top of the tax collection food chain. And he was no doubt lining his own pockets before he sent the required taxes off to Rome.

He was also a man with a curious mind. He had heard about Jesus because he was talk of the town all over Israel. Everywhere Jesus went there was a big crowd.

Slide 5 Danny DeVito claims he is 5' tall. In fact, he is 4'10". That was Zacchaeus' little problem. He couldn't see over the crowd, so he climbed a sycamore fig tree which you'll know if you've ever seen one, has low branches and is quite easy to climb.

Slide 6 Why did Zacchaeus want to see Jesus? I think there are three reasons.

Firstly - the obvious. **Slide 7** Why do people go to a firework display? Jesus was a sensation. He was box office. The end of the previous chapter tells us how Jesus had just healed a blind man on his way into Jericho. Zacchaeus may have heard the commotion outside and left his desk to see what was going on.

Slide 8 Secondly - I'm guessing here, but I think his distant memory of a godly mother and father prompted him to find out more. You see, the name Zacchaeus means "good, pure, righteous, upstanding." I imagine two parents who loved God and named their boy after their hopes and dreams for him, before he became greedy and rich.

But I think that Zacchaeus' parents planted a desire in his life to be good, to be honest, and he lost his way, but when the chance came along to make amends he took it.

Some of you have children or grandchildren who have wandered away from the path you hoped they would take. Where did it all go wrong? But keep praying for them, keep loving them. It's never wasted. Your spiritual input is never forgotten.

I think Zacchaeus longed to get back to what his godly mum and dad had always dreamed for him, and that's why he was determined to get to Jesus.

You don't get to be head honcho of the biggest tax office in the land by lacking ambition. When he made up his mind to get to Jesus, he did it.

There are a hundred things that can get in the way of a spiritual quest; work, family, leisure, the golf club, even church can get in the way. For Zacchaeus, nothing got in the way. He *had* to see Jesus for himself. He *had* to push through whatever it took.

Slide 9 The third reason he was so eager to see Jesus, is this. As we see later in the story, everybody hated him. He was a crook.

He had fleeced the entire population of Jericho to pay for his mansion. But none of his life of luxury made him happy. He was empty inside.

150 years ago, the writer John Ruskin said, "Every increased possession loads us with new weariness."

More recently comedian Russell Brand said this: "Drugs and alcohol are not my problem. Reality is my problem. Drugs and alcohol are my solution to fill up a hole inside of me."

Zacchaeus knew about this – and some of you might know about it too. Zacchaeus had a gaping void in his soul. He was miserable. All his chasing after the next luxury – at the time it looked so attractive, it seemed so compelling. But it was his ruin. He looked around his flashy villa with its luxury furnishings and it seemed like dust. It left him with a feeling of gnawing emptiness. And then Jesus walks into town.

Slide 10 Then to everyone's shock, Jesus noticed Zacchaeus in a leafy tree, actually spoke to him, knew him - by name, called him, accepted him just as he was and even befriended him.

Zacchaeus – After

Slide 11 "Come down now Zacchaeus" says Jesus. It's been said that he was converted before his feet hit the ground. He hurried down and

welcomed Jesus gladly. Jesus is still looking for people who will welcome him gladly into their lives.

Slide 12 Zacchaeus knew that *now* was the time and he seized the day.

Many people want a bit of meditation, a little statue of Buddha in the garden, some purple crystals and maybe the Lord's Prayer as the cherry on top. It won't do. It is Jesus or nothing; it's all of Jesus or nothing. That's what Zacchaeus understood. He couldn't hang on to his old life and he didn't want to.

Look at the immediate difference between before meeting Jesus and after. Instead of hostility there is hospitality. Instead of grabbing there is giving. It's instant transformation. It's not "I will give", it's "I give" – Zacchaeus is already writing the cheques. **Slide 13**

I was queuing up at a supermarket checkout once. My trolley was brimming over with stuff. As usual, my queue - though visibly the shortest - proved to be the slowest. As I was waiting, the checkout assistant came over and stuck a magnetic sign over my checkout. The sign said '10 Items maximum'. She looked at me and said "after you it's limited items only." But then, other people came along with three yoghurts in the basket and joined my queue. They started to mutter their disgust to each other about my trolley and how I was out of order. I felt so guilty – but that's false guilt.

But there's also such a thing as real guilt, and I feel that also from time to time as well. Jesus came to deal with all our guilt. This is the amazing news: God loves you. You are loved. It's the most important thing to take away from this morning: you are loved. God loves you.

And he came in the person of his Son, Jesus, born in poverty to die on a cross for you and for me. And he took all of our guilt, and took our place, in order that we should be free to enjoy life to the full.

This is the most stunning, wonderful news. And to me when I first discovered it as a self-conscious, anxious seventeen year old with zits and a brace on my teeth, it was totally life-changing.

Today

Slide 14 Three times in Luke's gospel the word "today" is found. The first you hear at Christmas – "Today a saviour has been born to you; Christ the Lord" say the angels.

The second you hear at Easter – "Today you will be with me in paradise" says Jesus to the dying thief.

And the third is right here. "Today salvation has come to this house... for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

Ending

Let me draw to a close. Last June I watched a video on an online news site about a petty criminal called Arthur Booth in a Miami court before a judge for burglary. And the Judge Mindy Glazer says to him, "One question for you sir. Did you go to Nautilus for Middle School?" And he looks at her and recognises her and just loses it right there, he breaks down and starts sobbing, saying over and over again, "oh my goodness!"

She says, with a smile, "I always wondered what happened to you. And looking around she says, "This was the nicest kid, the best kid, in middle school. I used to play football with him. And look what's happened to him." Then she shuffles her papers, looks right at him and says, "I hope you're able to change your ways. Good luck, you're free to go. Live a better life."

That's what Jesus does on the first day of the year – and every other day too.

Let's pray...