

The Story of Two Trees

This is the story of two trees;

Tree number one –

In the Manse garden there are two apple trees. One of them produces apples every summer. (A couple of weeks ago we brought carrier bags of apples to give away because there are too many apples for us to be able to use.) The trick is to pick them before they fall or they get damaged and are no good to eat, so one thing we try and do is to climb the tree and pick the apples. You can eat them, but we use them mainly for cooking. We lose lots of apples every year because we also play football in the garden and, however hard we try, the ball sometimes hits the tree and knocks down the apples. I think the foxes probably take a few too, but this apple tree always produces apples. This year was a relatively small crop. Some years we've had a huge amount of apples and sometimes it's quite a job to clear the grass of apples so that I can cut it!

We have another apple tree in the garden but this one is quite different. When we moved into the Manse eight years ago we were told this tree was dead! Dead in the sense that it didn't produce apples any more. If I remember right, it was even suggested we might have it cut down if we didn't want it in the garden. We didn't cut it down – but for no particular reason. It came in quite handy for hanging bird feeders on, and for you birdwatchers I've seen a Nuthatch, a Tree Creeper and a couple of Goldfinches on that apple tree! But, it has never produced any apples. It used to – it used to produce apples - but not now! One summer we got very close to building a tree house in it!

Two weeks ago I was playing football in the garden with Zac. He was in goal and I was standing waiting for him to return the ball after one of my power blasters! I found myself gazing mindlessly at the apple tree that's dead! For a moment – quite a long moment – I couldn't figure out what I was looking at, and I found myself thinking – how did that tennis ball get stuck there? (We have tennis balls that we occasionally play with in the garden – yes!) But – how could it get stuck there? It looked more like it was hanging from the branch – no wait – not hanging – more like stuck onto the branch. No – wait – that's not a tennis ball – it's – but it can't be – that tree's dead! For a moment I was a little confused. Then I said: "Zac – come and look at this. It's an apple growing on the apple tree that's dead!" I looked a bit harder and to my utter amazement there wasn't just one apple, there were more like 10!

Ten apples growing on a tree that was supposed to be dead! Just in case you think I'm making this up for the sake of a sermon – here are the pictures to prove it!



I spoke to a friend who knows about this sort of thing. I told him our apple tree was dead, but this year it had apples on it! Here's what he said: "Well it's possible that someone has planted a tree of the same type somewhere near that's pollinated at the same time as yours – and that's why you have apples."

That got me thinking – this tree was dead, but now it is alive – because something happened!

Tree number two –

He was hated the little man. He was a social pariah – someone to shun. People wouldn't even want to walk on the same side of the street as him. It wouldn't be too strong to say that people loathed him. Every day they would have to hand over their hard earned cash to him and he would see the hatred in their eyes. And they hated him. Tax collectors were seen as collaborators with Rome and as far as they were concerned Zacchaeus had sold his soul for money! The fact that he was a Jew, but tossed that aside to line his own pockets was the worst thing he could do. He was making hard lives harder – and taking far more than was owed. They knew it, and knew there was little they could do about it. As far as they were concerned he was dead, irredeemable, beyond hope. They'd written him off! Sinners were untouchables – barbers, tanners, shepherds; they were immoral – prostitutes, adulterers, gamblers, murderers. But top of the list were tax collectors.

Tradition taught that if a tax collector entered any house, the food and the premises were rendered unclean by their presence. You can't redeem a germ after all. And repentance for tax collectors was out of the question. Ironically Zacchaeus means "clean and innocent!" That must have lead to many cruel jokes at his expense. Roman taxation was a franchise business allowing some to become owners of a territory. The more they collected – the more they made and the chief tax collector took the most – he was the fat cat, head honcho!

One day Jesus came to town and of all the people who wanted to see him, to catch a glimpse of this man, was Zacchaeus. But a crowd was a dangerous place for Zacchaeus to be. He wasn't going to trust himself to the middle of a crowd – a punch in the kidneys, or worse! He was small and couldn't see anyway, so he climbed a tree. Amazing what you sometimes find in a tree! That's when it all went horribly wrong for Zacchaeus Or perhaps not!

He just wanted to see, get a glimpse. But when Jesus got to the Sycamore tree up which Zacchaeus was perched – he stopped. What would Jesus do? What would Zacchaeus do? Would Jesus topple Zacchaeus from his lofty perch – in more ways than one – with razor sharp words? The last thing Zacchaeus wanted was to be picked out of the crowd. But Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus by speaking his

name. To Jesus this 'sinner' Zacchaeus was not filed in 'S' for sinner. He had a name – he was a person - with hopes and fears just like everyone else. To Zacchaeus, Jesus' use of his name must have come as a great relief. But what happened next would have stunned everyone – Zacchaeus included. Jesus invited himself for lunch!

We love this though don't we?! We love the thought of the underdog coming out on top; we love the idea that Jesus would go and reach out to someone like Zacchaeus – the outcast – the untouchable. "That's right!" we want to shout! Because we love the end of this story. We love the fact that Zacchaeus did one of the most monumental 'U' turns recorded in the Bible: this greedy life long extortionist being transformed into a magnanimous philanthropist. Someone who was extraordinarily greedy became someone who was extraordinarily generous. But if we are not careful we may miss the point completely.

Think about the crowd there that day. Moments earlier they were cheering Jesus – now they are angry and hostile! Jesus wants a cup of tea with a traitor! Zacchaeus is the wrong kind of person. When Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's house no-one knows how this story will end. Jesus took a huge risk, a lot of people there would have said it was scandalous behaviour. To sit at a table with someone was to share intimacy - how could you do that with an unrepentant chief tax collector? The expectation of the crowd would have been that Jesus treat Zacchaeus as everyone else did. But Jesus chose a more creative alternative. He chose grace; kindness; the use of a man's name – he chose risky love.

Our vision statement reads:

“By 2010 CBC will be a vibrant family of Christians where every person is:

- Reaching communities with God's love.”

It's driven by our values, one of which is that “People Matter.” They matter to God therefore they matter to us. We will – we say, share the good news of Jesus with anyone who does not know him. That means we will follow Jesus in risky love, we will live the creative alternative to what everybody else expects.

The Story of the Two Trees.

In both trees what was thought to be dead, surprisingly and unexpectedly came to life. In both trees something was required to bring about that transformation. Friends, the pollen that God most often uses to bring about transformation in the lives of those he created is called 'risky love'. Friends, let us not rush to the end of the story and miss what is most important. Let's reach communities – your family, your friends, your neighbours, your work colleagues, those who no-one else will talk to, those who we think have got it all wrong, those in a mess, those who don't deserve us, those who have it all sewn up, with risky love.

Let's do it within the community of the church – those we find it hard to engage with, who we don't really like, and who have upset us. Let's try risky love, and let's do it outside this community in all the places that we go and then let's be surprised by joy when what was dead comes to life.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church by Rev. Ian Phillips on Sunday 7th September 2008.