

IT'S A MIRACLE!

He was hated and he knew it. He was a social pariah – someone everyone was happy to avoid if at all possible. Apart from a few of his cronies, most people loathed him. When they had to hand over their hard-earned cash to him you could see the hatred in their eyes. They hated not only the system that gave him his place, but they hated him too. He had sold his soul...to Rome. He'd sold his identity so he could line his pockets with the cash of his own people.

Zacchaeus made hard lives harder, and he did it to his own people. Zacchaeus was a sinner at the very top of the list – the story in Luke 19 makes that quite clear. Tradition taught that if a tax collector entered any house, both food and premises were rendered unclean by their presence, after all you can't redeem a germ.

It was thought the name Zacchaeus means, ironically, "clean and innocent." He must have been the subject of many cruel jokes. To make it worse Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. The Romans had made taxation into a franchise, so the chief tax collector could run agents and cream off even more money for himself.

But, Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. Perhaps, just maybe, it has something to do with truth. When Jesus comes to town there's always a crowd, and a crowd is not a place where Zacchaeus wants to be. Far too risky: a punch in the kidneys, or worse! Big in power but small in stature, he decides his best option is to climb a tree because he didn't want to miss whatever was going to happen with Jesus in town.

What happens next depends on your perspective. Perhaps it goes terribly wrong and for those who hated him, perhaps it all went wrong. Love, though, does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. From that perspective, maybe things are just about to go right.

Jesus stuns everyone, and stops, looks up into the sycamore tree, which Zacchaeus is sitting in and looks straight at him. What would he do...Jesus? Would Jesus cut him down to size with a few choice words which would have delighted the crowd? When he did speak, Jesus used Zacchaeus's name. Love is kind and it is not rude and it must have meant something to Zacchaeus to have Jesus speak his name. But what Jesus did next would have stunned

everyone – including Zacchaeus. Jesus invited himself to lunch at Zacchaeus' house.

This was a slap in the face for the crowd who only moments earlier had been cheering in praise for Jesus entry to town. Jesus was to take lunch with a traitor and not even a repentant one. In Ancient New Eastern culture, sitting at a table with another was an act of intimacy, this was wrong on all sorts of levels.¹ Jesus though wants to confront Zacchaeus, but he doesn't want to confront him with harsh words of condemnation or criticism. He wants to confront him with Love...actually!

To demonstrate love is a risk!

For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life. (John 3:16)

That was a risk – to love those he had created meant leaving all that he knew, the glory of heaven, to live among – well – people just like us.

Everybody hated Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was the enemy – he had sold his soul, for his own personal gain, to the occupying power. Nobody loved Zacchaeus. What possible reason could anybody have to love Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus just made hard lives harder. Why would anyone love Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus, after all, was the wrong kind of person.

How do you treat your enemies? How do you respond to those people you know are the wrong kinds of people?

One day, in Jericho, as Jesus was passing through, he took a risk, and stopped by the tree up which Zacchaeus was sitting. Why did he do that? Because he loves him, because he loves him, because he loves him. Zacchaeus, the enemy of the people, is greatly loved by God.

And Jesus said, we are to love our enemies.

Perhaps its true that many of our enemies are generalised – we put a face to a bigger issue. How would you respond, for example, if today on the BBC News, we were told that President Putin was dead? Perhaps someone like a President represents far more, than what he does, or is doing. How did we respond when we were told Osama Bin Laden had been killed? Perhaps we

¹ Adapted from: Lucas, J "Creating a Prodigal Friendly Church," Zondervan 2008 pages 33-37

make enemies of those whose actions or views represent issues far bigger than themselves or us.

Perhaps though, some enemies are much more personal. Perhaps there are other enemies who hold power over us and within us because of their particular relationship to us:

The bully from way back who haunts and taunts you to this day
The colleague who, for reasons you cannot understand, always seems to undermine you.
The friend who knows you well enough to press your buttons, and does
The relative who always gives you a hard time with seeming no reason
And, perhaps, yourself – because it is true that sometimes we can be our own worst enemy.

I can be my own worst enemy when I choose to do something I believe to be wrong and I find a way to rationalise it. I can be my own worst enemy when I focus on the parts of me that I don't like, and do that without considering all of me. I can be my own worst enemy when I am my own worst critic

I can be my own worst enemy when I convince myself that there is no-one who understands me so I choose to go it alone. I can be my own worst enemy when I find a way to justify my own sin. I can be my own worst enemy when I refuse to believe that God looks at me and declares me, 'Very Good.'

I can be my own worst enemy when I call ugly what God has made beautiful, or when I call lovely what God has said is wrong. I can be my own worst enemy when I give more influence to my critics than they deserve.

Perhaps, recognizing that I can be my own worst enemy, I can begin to see more of how loving my enemies might look if I could do it.

When Jesus went to stay with Zacchaeus that day, he declared that salvation had come to his house. Perhaps we think what Jesus meant was that Zacchaeus, because of what he did, gained eternal life. Perhaps we think what Jesus meant was that Zacchaeus, because of what he did, would get into heaven.

Perhaps both are true. But perhaps too, Jesus meant something more. Perhaps Jesus too, was saying that Zacchaeus had moved towards wholeness. The Hebrew for wholeness is Shalom – perhaps God's dream for the world as it should be. When we see and know God's love, when we see and know we are

beloved, when we know we are enough, we have peace (Shalom) and we are made whole.

Interestingly one Jewish Rabbi notes that 'Shalom' is used both as a greeting (hello) and as a farewell (goodbye). He notes that Shalom is a radical meeting of opposites. Jesus and Zacchaeus – love meeting the enemy perhaps? Rabbi Zaslow goes on to say: “It is the people you do not agree with who have the greatest gift for you – the gift of the potential for wholeness.”ⁱ

If true, that is a challenge. That those I disagree with, who I may even call my enemies, have the greatest gift for me – the gift of the potential for wholeness. Perhaps that is the gift Jesus gave Zacchaeus that day in Jericho. It is the gift that God so longs to give to all those he has created. It is the gift God so longs to give to you, and to me.

I remember a talk I heard the first year I was part of the beach mission in Nefyn in 1985. It was a talk at the end of a Sharks evening activity (11-14yr olds) by one of the young team leaders. He had the biggest pair of glasses I'd ever seen. He called them his acceptance specs and said God has glasses just like him. He didn't mean that literally, of course, what he meant was that when God looks at us, he accepts us, just as we are.

His challenge to the Sharks that evening was mostly about them knowing they were loved and accepted by God. But he also challenged them to think about looking at others through those same acceptance specs. The challenge that God looks at others in the same way he looks at us, that he loves them in the same way he loves us.

Maybe that's the challenge of the story of Zacchaeus, the one who was considered the enemy, gives the gift of wholeness. That gift, as it was wonderfully given to Zacchaeus, is given to us too. But it is also the gift offered to our enemies. Jesus, it seems, loves without limit. Jesus, it seems, invites us to do the same.

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ⁱ David Zaslow, quoted in Held Evans, R., *Wholehearted Faith*, HarperOne 2022, page 161