

## Sermon on 6th September 2020

*Romans 13:8-14, Luke 19:1-10*

Let us pray. Wherever we are, at home on zoom, or here in church: Help us, O Lord, to understand your word in our hearts and minds. Amen.

*'The night is far gone, the day is near'*, says Paul. Oh, I wish. We feel we have overcome a long dark time, locked in into our homes, and locked out of the church, and now, for many of us, it feels as if we are over the hump. Of course, some things have changed, but we simply call it 'The new normal', a term that helps us to make sense, and cope with all of this. If we are amongst those who are still shielding, amongst those who feel loss or despair, this term 'The new normal' suggests that we are simply expected to get used to it, and accept that this is the new standard. But beware: there is no point in trying to move on swiftly, we need time to truly process our feelings, to look at, and to honour, the grief surrounding us.

My heart goes out today to all of us who feel a bit left behind sitting in their homes, being reduced to small pictures on a zoom frame. However, it is all about perspective! On zoom, we could all be in the focus at times, and even Barbara felt as if she was a big sheep! Now while being here in church, she feels lost and insignificant. For our brothers and sisters on zoom, the church congregation is just one little frame amongst others, and the individual gets lost in the crowd. Of course, being physically present here in church, is lovely, and we are close to others, and yet, not as close as we would wish. No hugging, no handshakes. No singing, no wine. Here, too, we feel a sense of loss. The body of Christ is wounded, physically divided by an invisible enemy. We lost some of the things that make church special. And we all ask the same question with Psalm 121: *"Where does my help come from?"* And we can only remind ourselves time and again of the answer: *"My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."* Amidst all our internal and external struggles, that's the one big truth we need to cling to. Without being close to God's love, there is no real life.

And Zacchaeus knew it. He lived through the long darkness of sin: not loving others, instead exploiting them. Why? We don't know much of him, but I imagine, that as a small boy, he was probably an easy target for mockery. He was never as fast as the other boys, always the loser in tussles; and was called names. The other kids loved it to have somebody to pick on; that made them feel bigger. The little Zacchaeus couldn't do much about it. However, when he became a tax collector, he was the one in power, and he could pay these bullies back. And he did! That made him rich and he soon reached the top of the tree. A good life? Surely not: He was one of the most hated people in town.

So, what happened on that fateful day, when Jesus was passing through Jericho? Surely, Jesus' healings, and surprising acts were the talk of town. Something was stirring in Zacchaeus' heart, a new perspective dawned, but he had no idea what it was. He simply had to see Jesus. What a risk! The little man alone in a hostile crowd. An opportunity not to be missed! Oh no, they did not let him through; instead he collected all sorts of nasty little kicks and prods. Oh, the sweet taste of a little revenge! No chance for Zacchaeus to get through. What now? He needed a look-out. Running ahead on his short legs, he saw the tree. And the lower branches in Zacchaeus' reach, hey ho! Up

he went, not thinking of the embarrassment. Look at him: the mighty chief tax collector desperately clinging to a tree!

And then it happened: Jesus went past, and... stopped. And looked up.

Now close your eyes, and imagine that look. Right through you. Through all your pretence and defences. Right into the core. Not judging, just seeing. Terrifying! What about the things we want to hide? Oh dear! But no, it's totally different: Jesus does not judge or condemn. Instead, he loves. Zacchaeus. You. Me. Just as we are. This is salvation. All we have ever hoped for is there: love, forgiveness, getting things right, coming closer to God. A wave of peace washing over us, as we are engulfed and held in God's love.

But how can that be? Are we not unworthy of such love? How can God ever be pleased with someone like me? Zacchaeus had probably similar thoughts, hiding there, awkwardly clinging to that tree, but he knew in his heart: this was the moment. 'Kairos' in Greek, the absolutely right moment, not to be missed. Zacchaeus did not avoid Jesus' loving gaze, he held it. It would have been enough for little Zacchaeus just to have that.

Jesus could have walked on, knowing that Zacchaeus was saved now, but what about the others, the crowd? They, too, needed to see! So Jesus called: "*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.*" What? The crowd was muttering angrily. But Zacchaeus could not get down fast enough, his joy bubbling over. Salvation had come to him, and he wants to share it. He is craving to make at once amends for all the evil he has done, and paying people back more than he took, paying them back not just in money but in love. Paul says: '*Do not owe people anything... but always owe love to each other.*' Zacchaeus is doing just that, and by doing so, he is demonstrating what love is. Do not judge others! Do no wrong to your neighbour! Instead, wake up from your dark night of self-deception, and hiding from God, to the light of the truth!

So, do we need to climb a tree to see the truth? Well, no, thank God, because my tree climbing days are definitely over. But metaphorically, yes. It is the metaphor to be alert, to actively seek a look-out, to make an effort. And that's not just about walking to church or switching on our laptops or tablets at home. We need to be actively seeking where God is in all of this. And just like little Zacchaeus, we will find that God is actually already on the way, coming to meet us, inviting us to his grace.

So, the next time when we feel low, let us imagine Jesus is walking towards us, looking at us. Wherever we are, in a tree, at church, out and about, or in front of a screen, it does not matter. What matters is that God is looking at us, wherever we are, and loving us, regardless of how much or how little we love ourselves.

God can work through all of the things we are experiencing now, this 'new normal'. It is not really a helpful term: It does not allow us to deal properly with our present reality. It affects our psychological wellbeing, and ignores the fact that 'normal' is not working for the majority of society. We can do better. We have the knowledge of God's transforming Spirit, so therefore, we have something to offer to society, just listen to Paul! We can work towards creating a new paradigm, a

new order, not a 'new normal' that leaves the majority behind. Relating to us here as a parish, we have to stand united to live our fellowship – no one should feel left behind.

What would Jesus expect from us now? Wake up from our comfortable sleep, get onto a look-out, don't avoid God's gaze, see where we can make a difference, show solidarity, demonstrate love, and through all of that, bring salvation to others. Let's not be ignorant bystanders like the crowd in Jericho. Let's get onto that (metaphorical) tree, and imagine Jesus' look .... Going right through... And listen to Him, when He says: *'Hurry and come; for I must stay at your house!'* Amen.