

# Who needs to change?

30 October 2022

## INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS

Thinking about change and how people change ...

As we get older we get taller.

When Mums are expecting a baby, their shape changes as the baby grows.

In a family, having a new baby brother or sister will change things.

Sometimes how we think about a person changes too. Maybe someone shares their favourite toy with us and we find out that we want to be their friend.

In our Bible story today, there is a man called Zacchaeus, who we'll call Zac. His job was collecting money from people. He was a bit mean. That meant he didn't have many friends ... see how unhappy he looks.

One day there was great excitement because Jesus was coming. People had heard all the things Jesus was doing. Perhaps he'd tell a story or heal someone. Zac went out among the crowd of people wanting to see Jesus.



But Zac was short so he couldn't see over all the people. Then he had an idea.

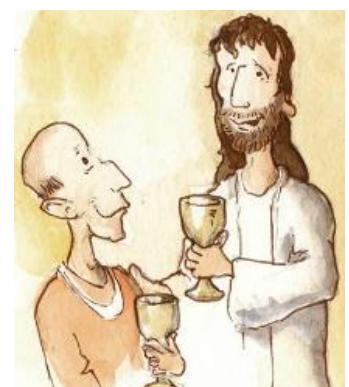


I'll climb up a tree so I can see this Jesus when he walks past. But then something amazing happened. Jesus stopped right under the tree where Zac was and said, 'Zac, I need to come to your house for lunch today!'

The people in the crowd were shocked.

Didn't Jesus know what a mean person Zac was?

But it was all good. There was something in the way Jesus greeted him that changed Zac's heart. He didn't want to be mean anymore. He wanted to share what he had with other people. Jesus was impressed.





Then Jesus was gone again. But Zac was a new person, a friendly person now.

## BIBLE READINGS

[Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4](#)

The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

How long, Lord, must I call for help,  
but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, 'Violence!'  
but you do not save?

Why do you make me look at injustice?  
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;  
there is strife and conflict abounds.

Therefore the law is paralysed,  
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,  
so that justice is perverted. ...

I will stand at my watch  
and station myself on the ramparts;  
I will look to see what God will say to me,  
and what answer he will give to this complaint.

Then the Lord replied:

'Write down this revelation  
and make it plain on tablets  
so that a herald may run with it.

For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end  
and will not prove false.

Though it linger, wait for it;  
it will certainly come

and will not delay.

‘See, the enemy is puffed up;  
his desires are not upright –  
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.

[Luke 19:1-10 \(The Message\)](#)

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn’t see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.” Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumbled, “What business does he have getting cosy with this crook?”

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, “Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I’m caught cheating, I pay four times the damages.”

Jesus said, “Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, a son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.”

## MESSAGE

The world can be a **harsh place** ... when we think back over just the last year we have seen the ongoing suffering and death caused by Covid in the community, a never ending series of floods down the east coast of Australia, a major war in Ukraine that has sent costs for gas and electricity spiralling, rapidly rising interest rates making buying a house even more difficult, people struggling with mental health issues and burnout at work.



While this past year may seem to be worse than others, the cycle of history suggests that life is often difficult. Listen to the complaint of the Hebrew

prophet Habakkuk reflecting on life in his day ...

Everywhere I look I see destruction and violence,  
strife and conflict.

I see injustice so that the law is powerless.

I cry out to you God, but you don't seem to listen.

We need your help, O God, but you don't seem to act.



God's somewhat cryptic response to Habakkuk is to be **patient** and to write down **God's** perspective on the situation. Those whom God regards as **enemies** – both nations that oppress God's people but also the rich and heartless among God's own people – these people will themselves be overcome by violence and destruction.

Meanwhile **righteous** people are called to continue to live by their **faithfulness**. They will continue to shine a light in the darkness. The closing words of Habakkuk are a stirring call to faith even in the face of difficulty. He writes:

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*Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no grain ...  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation!  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and enables me to stand on the mountains.  
(Hab 3:17-19)*

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The situation in Jesus' day was in many ways similar to what Habakkuk experienced. There was still conflict and violence – now inflicted by the Romans and their lackeys. God still seemed silent and unmoved. The people of Jericho might have had similar thoughts to Habakkuk on the day Jesus was passing through ... here we are, **groaning** under the oppression of the Romans, being forced to pay taxes to Caesar that we can't afford. The climate is still fickle, our crops are never certain and yet for people like our chief tax collector, Zacchaeus (the 'no-good collaborator'), life is so cushy and comfortable.

So God please do something!

But maybe today will be different. We've heard on the grapevine that the prophet from Galilee, **Jesus**, is passing through town with his band of followers. Perhaps he can bring some **relief** or some **hope** to us ... Perhaps he'll **heal** someone. We can't wait to see what might happen today!



There are, of course, multiple sides to every story and situation.

We probably know the story of struggle of people in our own family.

And perhaps for a few of our neighbours.

But mostly we don't **really** know what's going on in the lives of most people. Likewise for the people who come to **Helping Hand** or the **weekly lunches** at Croydon North or even to **Drop-In**. They come seeking food, company and a listening ear, but we don't know their full story.

So it is with Zacchaeus or Zac.

We know he was a **tax collector** and he was **rich**, so he was probably despised by most people.

We know he was **short in stature**.

And we know he was **curious** about Jesus and was **inventive** and quick-thinking – climbing up a tree to get a better view.



But beyond these few points we don't know his full story.

It's usually assumed that he was mean and greedy and untrustworthy, because that is the stereotype we have of tax collectors. In the gospels, Jesus' opponents lump all tax collectors into the social category of '**sinners**'. So we might assume he had few friends other than fellow tax collectors and Roman officials.

Yet Zac was willing and able to offer Jesus and his disciples **hospitality** at short notice. After his encounter with Jesus he suddenly becomes **generous** with his wealth ... a typical English translation reads something like this:





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*Lord, I will give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*

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So the assumption is that Zac had a dramatic **conversion type experience**, based on the welcome and grace of Jesus and that he now saw the world through different eyes and may even give up his dishonest profession of tax collecting.

But perhaps that's not the whole story. There is an alternative way to read it. Most English translations use **future tense verbs** to describe Zac's change of heart. He **was** mean and greedy, but having met Jesus, he **will** – in the **future** – become a different person. Perhaps Zac is like a person visiting their doctor and being told they must change their lifestyle or face dire consequences – sure, Doc, I know I eat all the wrong foods and never exercise, but I **will** change that, starting now. I **really will**.

In the Greek, however, the verbs are **present tense** so have more the sense of an **already occurring** or **habitual** action. So a better English translation would be:



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*Lord, I'm already giving half my possessions to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone, I am paying back four times as much.*

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So perhaps Zac wasn't as mean and unjust as we might imagine.

His story may well be included as a deliberate **contrast** to the story in the previous chapter of Luke's Gospel about a **rich young ruler** who meticulously keeps the Ten Commandments of the Law and who was most likely regarded as a model citizen.



Jesus disturbs this rich young man by telling him that he lacks **one important thing**. He needs to **sell** what he has and **give the money to the poor** so he will indeed have treasure, in heaven. If he does this, he will be ready to follow Jesus. The story ends with the rich ruler going away sad – but still very rich – because he was **unable** or

**unwilling** to share his wealth with the poor.

So Luke offers us two **contrasting stories** about rich people and how they respond to Jesus. In the first story, the rich ruler **doesn't** share his wealth with the poor and so misses out on the blessings of the kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing.



In the second story, Zac the rich tax collector **does** share his wealth with the poor and is therefore welcome to enter the kingdom of God.

At the end of this second story, Jesus praises Zac and declares that:



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*Today, right here and now, salvation has come to this house, for this man is also a son of Abraham.*

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So if Zac **already** had a habit of giving generously to the poor, how has salvation only **now** come to his house?

Perhaps it wasn't **Zac** who needed converting.

Perhaps it was his **neighbours** who could only ever see him as a mean tax collector, a sinner despised by God, and who grumble loudly when Jesus goes to eat at his house. Perhaps it is **their** eyes that are opened and **they** who can now see and accept Zac for who he really is, a child of Abraham and someone accepted by God.



So when Jesus finishes by saying that he came to seek and save the lost, those who are 'lost' could well include the crowds and neighbours who have been excluding people like Zac from his rightful place in the community.

The salvation that Jesus brings in Luke's Gospel is very much about **restoring excluded people to community** – whether they are excluded because of their **profession** – a tax collector like Zacchaeus – or because of **disease** – like the lepers a couple of chapters earlier – or because of their **gender** or **ethnic descent** or perceived **uncleanness**.

Nothing was a barrier for Jesus – everyone was welcome in God's kingdom!

Who is it that WE see as unacceptable to God? What are our biases? Is it those from other denominations or religions? Is it those from a specific ethnic group or race, or place in our society such as convicted criminals? Maybe any of them are like Zac and have already been welcomed into God's kingdom and are waiting for us to recognise this and welcome them into our community.

I want to close with a poem by Martin Wallace that alerts us to how Jesus treats everyone he meets as a unique individual, yet how we are sometimes quick to make judgments ...

As you and I walk down our street  
where all the houses seem to be cut from a similar mould  
and each door looks much the same,  
it would be easy to be mistaken  
and assume that those inside each house  
are also from a common mould.

Yet we know, Lord,  
that each household has a different story  
of happiness, heartache and health,  
of wealth, weariness and worry,  
of sadness, solitude and sickness,  
of energy, encouragement and excitement.

We see pictures of biblical villages,  
drawn with square white houses all looking the same,  
where the same assumption could well be made.

Yet you cut through all of that  
and treated each person individually:

To some you said ...

'Follow me...'; or 'Return ...'; or 'Give away ...';

To others you said ...

'Be reborn ...'; or 'Tell everyone ...'; or 'Keep silent ...'.

Keep us alive, Lord,  
to the special uniqueness  
that lies behind each and every door