

MESSAGE – What do justice and peace look like?

Read: [Habakkuk 1:1-4](#), [Habakkuk 2:1-4](#), [Luke 19:1-10](#)

The world is in a mess ...

When you look at the world, I wonder if you sometimes see things in a similar way to the prophet Habakkuk? Do you see violence, destruction and injustice spiraling out of control? The opening cry of Habakkuk appears timeless ... **Lord, how long must we wait? The world is in a mess and you're not doing anything to make it right!**

But the prophet does not give up hope. He has great faith in the **justice** of God, and, having accused God of being derelict in his duties, as it were, he waits for a response. The answer comes in a cryptic sort of way. God is in charge and does have a plan – a vision – that will come at the right time. Habakkuk is to be patient and wait for this plan to come. In the meantime, God's people are to live by faith.

Fast forward to the first century and the apostle Paul. He quotes from this vision of Habakkuk to start off his rather long argument in the book of Romans. The world may still be in a mess, but God has now acted – through the life and death of Jesus – to bring justice to all. Those who want to live upright lives are still called to live by faith – faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Fast forward again to today and again not much seems to have changed. There is still violence and injustice and we still cry out for God to act.

The answer we receive is still much the same – we are to live by faith – and show the world that there is an alternative vision – the way of peace and of justice for all – the way of Jesus. The Uniting Church version of this vision for Australia is outlined on the following page. I wonder whether this vision resonates with you and how you are living it out ...?



We see a nation where each person and all creation can flourish and enjoy abundant life.

The Uniting Church in Australia believes the whole world is God's good creation.

Each person is made in God's image and is deeply loved by God. In Jesus, God is completing the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation.

Our vision, grounded in the life and mission of Jesus, is for a nation which:

- is characterised by love for one another, of peace with justice, of healing and reconciliation, of welcome and inclusion.
- recognises the equality and dignity of each person.
- recognises sovereignty of First Peoples, has enshrined a First Peoples voice and is committed to truth telling about our history.
- takes seriously our responsibility to care for the whole of creation.
- is outward looking, a generous and compassionate contributor to a just world.

There's something about Jesus that attracts ...

While Habakkuk's complaint describes the experience of injustice in general terms, the story of Zacchaeus – or Zac for short – offers a snapshot of that same reality. As we saw last week, tax collectors in Jesus' day were despised – both for collaborating with the Romans and for ripping off ordinary people by over taxing them, meaning that they lived comfortably – especially chief tax collectors like Zac – while many other lives were destroyed through their greed and corruption.

But there is something about Jesus and his message that intrigues and appeals to people in every age – even to tax collectors like Zac who is curious to see Jesus and, although thwarted by the crowds and his size, he doesn't give up but perseveres. I wonder whether there is something about Jesus that your unchurched friends are intrigued by. You might like to ask them one day.

Jesus stops, listens, acts

Jesus was quite used to having large crowds follow him, but there is something odd about a grown man up in a tree that intrigues him and he stops to speak to Zac.

Jesus acts out what one preacher described as the two second rule – stopping for just long enough to discern if God might be prompting him to speak with this person up in the tree. Jesus sensed that here was a person who needed to talk with him – and from his side – here was an opportunity to impart some grace. So Jesus stops and begins a conversation with Zac.

This two second rule applies to us when we have morning tea. When you notice someone looking a little worn out, or someone smiles at you and says good morning, take just a couple of seconds and check, in your heart, if here is someone you're meant to talk with this morning. The same thing works if you're out and about shopping or doing other errands and you spot someone who might need a listening ear. Take the two seconds and see if perhaps you're the one to impart some **grace** into the other person's life.

Who plays the host?

In a twist on accepted custom, it is Jesus who initiates the hospitality that follows, inviting himself over to Zacchaeus's house for a meal. Zac happily agrees. So although Zac is notionally the host, it seems to be **Jesus** offering the welcome mat, to which Zac responds. I'm sure there is much more to this story than we're told, and I even wonder whether Zac might even be the unnamed tax collector from last week's parable who Jesus has seen in the Temple praying.

But something changes in Zac's whole outlook when Jesus openly welcomes him. It's as if Jesus sees through all his masks and tough exterior – and accepts him – and **loves** him – in spite of his greedy ways. Right then and there, Zac declares that he is giving half his possessions to the poor and paying back anyone he has defrauded. The Greek verbs are present tense – it's not something he plans to do in the future – rather he is starting to change his life right now, in the presence of Jesus.

Luke appears to have deliberately placed two contrasting responses to wealth in back-to-back chapters. In the previous chapter, a rich ruler is also intrigued with Jesus and quizzes him about eternal life. Jesus suggests that he

generously share his wealth with the poor, but the rich ruler can't bear to be parted from his money and we're told that he goes away sad. By contrast, Zac spontaneously decides that he will share his ill-gotten wealth with the poor.

These two stories offer two possible responses on what we do with our money. One response maintains the person's own kingdom of self while the second response builds the kingdom of God. The two stories also illustrate that we can't judge a person – or their likely response to Jesus – from outward appearances.

What does 'salvation' look like?

Observing Zac's change in heart, Jesus declares that:

*'Today **salvation** has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham'.*

Salvation is a loaded word in the Christian vocabulary that is sometimes linked with 'sin' and being 'born again' and 'going to heaven'. Because of these connotations, some people are tempted to give up on this rich word. But I want to keep this word – which is central to Luke's understanding of Jesus and the gospel message.

For Luke, salvation has various nuances including healing, wholeness, peace, rescue from trouble, restoration to community – and yes – also – release from sins. When a lost or excluded person is 'saved', it suggests that whatever stopped them from full participation in the life of the community and full relationship with God has been dealt with and remedied so that the person is restored to their rightful place.

In this case, Zac had been shunned and excluded by his community because of his profession of tax collecting. With his change of heart, Zac is pronounced to be restored to his full identity as a son of Abraham, a member of God's people, a person blessed by God. Jesus announces this not just for Zac's sake but to the whole community – so that they too will accept Zac back into their midst in a new way. That's salvation, Jesus style.

The story of Zacchaeus suggests that the first step to including people in our

community is often belonging – it starts with feeling welcomed and accepted and loved – as Zac was by Jesus. It then moves to behaving in ways inspired by the teaching of Jesus – in this case Zac deciding to share his money generously with others. Only then is it possible to move to believing – that God accepts us and calls us God’s children – part of God’s family – which is how Jesus finally addresses Zac. Of course, this influences how we order our life together and how we help people feel like they belong ...

We began by thinking about the miserable state of the world that fills our newspapers and nightly TV bulletins and how we often want to join Habakkuk’s cry of ‘How long, Lord?’. But we’ve also seen how lives can be changed by an encounter with Jesus. This appears to be God’s way of tackling injustice and violence – as individuals have a change in heart attitude and start following the ways of Jesus – the ways of love, acceptance, forgiveness, justice and standing with people in their suffering.

Let us conclude by considering the words of this hymn from the Iona Community that challenge us to walk in this narrow way of Jesus...

INSPIRED BY LOVE AND ANGER

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,
Informed of God's own bias, we ask him once again:
"How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self-interest turn prayer and pity blind?"

From those forever victims of heartless human greed,
Their cruel plight composes a litany of need:
"Where are the fruits of justice? Where are the signs of peace?
When is the day when prisoners and dreams find their release?"

From those forever shackled to what their wealth can buy,
The fear of lost advantage provoke the bitter cry:
"Don't query our position! Don't criticise our wealth!
Don't mention those exploited by politics and stealth!"

To God, who through the prophets proclaimed a different age,
We offer earth's indifference, its agony and rage:

"When will the wronged be righted? When will the kingdom come?
When will the world be generous to all instead of some?"

God asks, "Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?"

Amused in someone's kitchen, asleep in someone's boat,
Attuned to what the ancients exposed, proclaimed and wrote,
A saviour without safety, a tradesman without tools
Has come to tip the balance with fishermen and fools.

(Tune: Sally Gardens (Irish trad.) c. Graham Maule. Wild Goose Publications, c/o The Iona Community)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9pS7JS5Rqo>