

1. The reasons for Christmas - Why did Jesus come? He came to seek and to save the lost

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Amen. Well, I shall read our Bible passage in just a moment, but just a few words of introduction. I'm due to be with you for these three Wednesday lunchtimes, the three Wednesdays that we still have between now and Christmas.

And what I'd like to do for these three Wednesday services is to take three sayings of Jesus which explain why he came. It's not a bad thing to think about, is it, at this time of the year?

Why did he come? Why did he make that long, long journey from bliss to bedlam? To share our humanity? To be at one with us? To prepare for the cross and the resurrection?

Well, yes, all those things, of course, are wonderfully true. But we're going to listen to him answer that question as to why he came in his own words. Because his own words, of course, have a peculiar power.

It's fine for theologians or preachers to make up their approximations of why he came. But it's his own words that have a special forcefulness. So let me read now a very familiar gospel passage, Luke chapter 19 and verses 1 to 10.

[1 : 09] If you'd like to follow, it's on page 878 in our church Bibles. Luke 19, 1 to 10. It's the story of Zacchaeus meeting Jesus. But as I read it, listen out for the phrase, watch for the phrase in which Jesus explains why he came.

So here we go, verse 1. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich.

And he was seeking to see who Jesus was. But on account of the crowd, he could not, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today. So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled. He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.

[2 : 25] And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold. And Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Well, you'll have quickly spotted that golden sentence there in verse 10.

The Son of Man came, here's the reason, to seek and to save the lost. So it was a search and rescue mission, to seek and to save what was lost.

So those of us who are Christians have not only been saved, we were also sought by Jesus before we were rescued. And it's good to remember the seeking as well as the saving.

You know, we often think of Jesus as our saviour, and indeed he is. But it's easy to forget that before he rescued us, he was looking. He had the searchlights out, the arclights, if you like.

Searching into the odd corners of the human landscape for the likes of you and me.

[3 : 32] We have, all of us, come from odd corners of the human landscape, isn't that right? He has winkled us out of our hiding places. Rather like a little child searching on the beach at low tide.

It's as though Jesus has been turning over the rocks, looking for us. So he came not only to save the lost, but to seek them. And if you're not yet a Christian, the truth about you is that you are being sought.

The one who loves you is looking for you, even now, and is calling you out of your hiding place. Come out, he says. You need to come to me.

He's searching for you. Now, this passage, verses 1 to 10, tells the story of how Jesus searched for and saved Zacchaeus. And one reason why this story is recorded for us in the Bible is that it illustrates how Jesus goes about this seeking and saving of lost people in every generation.

There are elements in the story, of course, which are unique to Zacchaeus. And we'll look at those in a moment. But behind this search and rescue mission to Zacchaeus, we learn also about the way that Jesus seeks and saves countless other people who are lost.

[4 : 44] And lost is what all of us are until we are found. So let's look at the details of Zacchaeus and his position in life and of how Jesus met him and transformed him.

I've got three headings. First, Zacchaeus was outwardly secure, but inwardly troubled. There are two things in verse 2 which show us how he was outwardly secure.

First, we read, he was a chief tax collector. And second, he was rich. Now, he wasn't the Inland Revenues office boy. He was a senior official in the system.

And if you wanted a big office and a big mahogany desk, a big house and prestige, then being a chief tax collector in the Roman Empire was the thing to be.

There was nothing to beat it. And he had been, for years, literally raking in the shekels. So outwardly, Zacchaeus had it made. His nest was feathered.

[5 : 47] His wife, you might say, could walk up Buchanan Street in Jericho. And she wasn't forced just to look through those great plate glass windows in the shops, longing for the things that are inside which she could not buy.

Not at all. She could hold her head high, walk in with a wallet full of money, and she could buy anything she chose. Outwardly, Zacchaeus had it made. He was secure.

But inwardly, he was troubled. And we know that because the words he says to Jesus are the product of an unhappy conscience. Look at what he says there in verse 8.

Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, which means I've defrauded a lot of people of a lot of things, whatever I've defrauded, I'm going to restore it fourfold.

Now, if that's not a guilty conscience coming clean, I don't know what is. So you can see what kind of a man Jesus is dealing with here. Outwardly secure, but inwardly troubled.

[6 : 47] And aren't there lots and lots of folk who are just like that? The details may vary. After all, not many rich and crooked tax collectors, I guess, are found in Glasgow.

But the basic pattern is just the same. Outwardly on top of things. Perhaps holding down a job. Looking smart and smiling and spruced up. But inwardly, defeated, disordered and unhappy.

Conscious that somehow life is not being lived on its proper foundation. Now, is it possible that Jesus, the wonderful Jesus, could be interested in a person like that?

Well, he was interested in Zacchaeus, wasn't he? Perhaps a person might think, I need to be a better person before I could really have dealings with Jesus. I need to be a bit more morally sorted out.

I'm too grubby. I'm too chaotic. I've not been a nice person at all. I'm not yet religious enough. But it's clear from this passage that Jesus was very interested in Zacchaeus.

[7 : 56] So if there's hope for Zacchaeus, there's hope for all of us. So there's the first thing about him. Outwardly secure, but inwardly troubled. Now, secondly, Zacchaeus was hated by men, but loved by God.

The story itself shows just how hated he was. Let's look at some of the details here. Zacchaeus heard that, perhaps on the grapevine, I don't know how these things got around, but he heard that Jesus was coming to Jericho.

And verse 3 tells us that he very much wanted to see who Jesus was. Jesus' fame had spread all over Judea. After all, it's one thing to hear about a famous person, but it's another thing actually to see them in the flesh, isn't it?

And Zacchaeus very much wanted to see who Jesus was. But there was a problem. Zacchaeus was a little man. And there was a big crowd of big people who had gathered in the roadway to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Do you remember the two Ronnies? Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett? Remember how Ronnie Barker would sometimes say to Ronnie Corbett, Stand up! And Ronnie Corbett would say to him, But I am standing up!

[9 : 08] Now, that was Zacchaeus' problem, wasn't it? Five foot and half an inch, and surrounded by people who could have played rugby in the Scottish second row. So what does he do? He runs on ahead, he climbs up into the sycamore tree, and he peers down through the branches.

And the fact that he ran on ahead shows just how eager he was. And when Jesus reached the tree, he stopped beneath it, and he saw this face peering at him down through the leaves.

And he said, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today. There's a sense of urgency, not just in Zacchaeus, but in Jesus. So look at that joyful little verse 6.

So he hurried and came down, and received him joyfully. Something was happening in this man's heart. Something had happened to make him want, this crooked tax collector, to want to receive the pure Son of God into his home joyfully.

But, and this is the telling point, all the bystanders in verse 7 saw this exchange, and they saw Jesus going off to Zacchaeus' house, and they said disapprovingly, he has gone to be the guest of a sinner.

[10 : 22] And that was less a criticism of Zacchaeus than it was a criticism of Jesus. Because Jesus surely should have discerned, been a man of discernment, to see that he must keep the right company.

But he's going off to be with Zacchaeus. So it shows how Zacchaeus was regarded by his neighbours. They thought of him as a class A brigand. I mean, how would you like it if the people in your street spoke of you as a sinner?

A scoundrel? And ne'er do well. Every time you emerge from your front door and walk down the path, everybody tuts and looks away and never says good morning to you. So the price that Zacchaeus paid for being a wealthy, cheating tax collector was that his neighbours hated him.

I suppose it's not really very surprising. It was well known in the Jewish communities that the tax collectors were only supposed to collect a certain amount of tax. But invariably they charged more. And they put the rest of it into their back pocket. And they usually got away with it without being lynched. But they were deeply unpopular because they were cheats. They were growing rich at the expense of their neighbours.

[11 : 30] But this man, although he was hated and despised by his neighbours, found that he was not hated by Jesus. In fact, Jesus seemed to value him enormously.

Secondly, is it possible that a person who is hated by men could be loved by God? Well, the story suggests that it is.

Well, we've seen that Zacchaeus was outwardly secure but inwardly troubled, hated by men but loved by God. And now thirdly, Zacchaeus thought he was seeking.

But in truth, he was sought. When the story begins, all eyes are on this little man huffing and puffing along the road and then losing the last shreds of his dignity, he gathers up the skirts of his robe and climbs up into the sycamore tree and there he is, peering down through the foliage.

And we could be forgiven at that stage for thinking that this man was seeking Jesus. So it's quite a surprise at the end of the story to find that the opposite is taking place.

[12 : 36] Because at the end, Jesus does not say to Zacchaeus, congratulations my friend for seeking me out, what a fine fellow you are. He says, the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

So although at one level, superficially, Zacchaeus was seeking to see Jesus, the big truth is that Jesus was seeking him. Don't you think there's a similarity between Zacchaeus peering down through the sycamore leaves into the face of Jesus and Adam peering, as it were, through his fig leaf defense at the Lord God who likewise had come looking for him in the Garden of Eden?

We get it so wrong if we think that religion is all about man's search for God. As though we have noble John Bull.

Oh, he's an Englishman, isn't he? Who would John Bull be in Scotland? Would he be Jock McBull? Anyway, we'll call him Mr. Everyman, shall we? Anyway, we have Mr. Everyman who's a noble, high-souled individual who spends his life searching for an elusive God.

And the prevailing view today, and we hear this in the media all the time, is that the best Mr. Everyman can do in the matter of religion is to go searching around amongst all the different religions of the world, picking out the bits that he finds most compatible with his idea of the good and happy life.

[14:02] So he'll say, for example, I've been searching for 10 years, 20 years or so, and in my searches I have discovered a number of important things. I've discovered serenity and acceptance in Buddhism.

I very much like the sense of being linked to one's ancestors that we get in some of the more primitive African religions. I like the Native American emphasis on the way in which mankind is somehow all linked in with all the different types of creation, the water and the trees and the air and the wild animals.

You know, I look at the grizzly bear and I say, Mr. Bear, I love you and I respect you. And he says, Whoa! And we separate, we go our own ways in peace. Then I turn to Judaism, having been to North America, and I so much enjoy the colour of Judaism and the humour and the cuisine. And so it goes on. So Mr. Everyman looks here and there in the supermarkets of religions and he takes certain bits off the shelves and puts them into his shopping trolley and then goes home with these different little bits and pieces gathered.

And how does he then feel? Well, he hardly feels that he's arrived at the truth after all, his modern mindset forbids him to use such a strong category as truth.

[15:18] But at least he pats himself on the back, quietly congratulates himself on learning how to rub along with what he thinks is the real world. But Jesus says that he's lost.

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Now, what does he mean by that word, that poignant, aching word, lost?

In what sense was Zacchaeus lost? After all, in terms of this world, he had an influential position. He was rich. No doubt he had friends in high places.

He wasn't a down and out. He wasn't a drunkard or a beggar. In financial terms, in social terms, he'd made it. And yet Jesus says that he was lost.

So Jesus cannot be talking in this world's terms. He must be talking about an eternal lostness. Lost from God.

[16:17] Lost in hell. Lost forever. Jesus' view of people is so wonderfully simple. All through the four Gospels, we find that Jesus, and it's the same with the Apostles in the later parts of the New Testament, Jesus sees people as belonging to one of two categories.

Either the lost or the saved. There's no third position. And how different that is from the general view of things in the world. We naturally want to categorize people in all sorts of drawers, don't we? Top drawer, second drawer, third drawer, right down to about the tenth drawer. So in the top drawer you have the royal family, a few multi-millionaires, pop stars, sporting heroes.

In the second drawer you might have university professors. Consultant physicians, head teachers, top brass in the armed forces, and so on and so on, right down to the very bottom drawer the people who would be considered the dregs of society.

What did President Sarkozy call those rioters in France a year or so ago? Scum? Isn't that right? Scum is a drawer by drawer word, isn't it?

[17:28] That's the way the world looks at people. But Jesus doesn't separate people by drawers. He separates people by doors. You're either on one side of the door or on the other side of the door.

You're either lost or you're saved. So who are the saved? Well the saved are those who have been sought out by Jesus and have then gladly surrendered to him.

So if you're a Christian this is what has happened. You heard from the Bible perhaps a long time ago that by nature you were under the Lord's judgment. and rightly so. The Bible taught you that you'd lived without him.

That you'd spurned him all through your life. And that although he'd given you everything your very life and everything needed to sustain your life yet you lived as though you were self-sufficient.

But then you heard the Bible's message and your conscience became pained and fearful. Your conscience condemned you and God's voice also condemned you justly.

[18:34] But then in your fear in your sense of trouble and bewilderment you looked up and you saw that Jesus on the cross has borne God's condemnation of you in your place.

And at last you realized why he had come. Not first and foremost to demonstrate how to live a good human life but first and foremost to rescue you from a position of peril that you could not rescue yourself from.

And then you surrendered. You capitulated. You came to Jesus burdened as you were with your guilt and sin and rebellion and you thanked him for dying for you so that you could be forgiven. So that you could live and no longer be lost and hell bound. That's what it is to be saved. But to be lost. Lost means lost forever.

Forever. Gone from the presence of the wonderful and true God with no hope of ever returning. Why did Jesus come? He came to seek and to save the lost.

[19 : 40] The dreadful judgment of God is not something that we need to stay under if we will but come to Jesus and surrender to him. It's only our pride that prevents us from doing that if we haven't yet done it.

But if we will come to him and say to him Lord Jesus you are the Lord I acknowledge it. I've held out quite long enough against you and now I'm coming to you and like Zacchaeus I want to receive you joyfully.

I come confessing my sin like Zacchaeus and I want you to say to me the words that you said to him all those years ago. The Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.

So let me ask if you're not a believer if you've never spoken to Jesus like that if you've never asked him to be your saviour will you do it today because nothing is more important.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Lord Jesus we think of the lovely compassion with which you dealt with Zacchaeus this man whose life although rich was in a mess and was not right with God and we thank you that you have dealt with so many of us in the same compassionate and wonderful way opening our eyes to understand the truth about you and we pray for any here today who are lost and ask that you will graciously help them and enable them to come to you in glad surrender to acknowledge that you are the Lord the only true Lord and to find life as they put their trust in you.

[21 : 25] These things we ask for your dear name's sake. Amen.