

1. He Came to Seek and to Save the Lost

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Date: 06 December 2009

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[0 : 0 0] Well, perhaps we could turn together again to Luke's Gospel, chapter 19, on page 878 in our Church Bibles. Now, tonight we have the first in a little series of three leading up to Christmas.

And on these three Sundays, we have two Sunday evenings now and then one Sunday morning just before Christmas, I want to take three famous sayings of Jesus in which he explains why he came to planet Earth some 2,000 years ago.

I think it's very helpful that he so plainly states several times in the four Gospels just why he came. And it's good for us to think about this at this particular time of year.

People are beginning to think about why Jesus came. At least some people are beginning to think, why did he come? I don't suppose the shops in Socky Hall Street or in Buchanan Street have much idea why he came.

Now, they are selling lots of Christmassy type stuff, aren't they, at the moment? We have Christmas lights all over George Square. We have Christmas trees apparently sprouting up at the pavements and in the station concourses.

[1 : 0 8] But do the shops and the pavements understand the reason for Jesus' coming? Why did he come all those years ago? Was it to be admired by a cow and a donkey leaning over the manger in the stable?

Was it to be sung songs to by choirs of angels leaning on their golden harps? Well now, let's turn to Luke chapter 19 and verse 10. And here's the first of the three verses that I've selected in which Jesus explains why he came.

So let's hear it from his own mouth. Verse 10. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. He came to seek out those who were lost.

He came to save those who were lost. And you'll see that those ideas about seeking and saving the lost are not given to us as a philosophical puzzle or a kind of brain teaser.

They're embedded in a real life story. They arise out of an incident in which Jesus meets a real man who is really lost. And Jesus really does seek him out and really does save him.

[2 : 1 7] So we're in the real world here. The great truths of the Christian faith are always embedded in real situations and real relationships and real people like ourselves.

The business of Jesus seeking and saving the lost is not some philosophical question, like the question about how many angels might dance on the head of a pin, or the question of what kind of noise is made by one hand clapping.

The Christian gospel thankfully plunges us right into the real world. In this case, the real world of a man who was rich but lost.

Now the story, the incident, is simply told and very directly told by Luke the Evangelist. And it's this, that Jesus comes to Jericho. That's the same Jericho whose walls fell down by the power of God in the days of Joshua, some 1400 years previously, as the Israelites came into the land of Canaan.

And in Jericho, in around 30 AD, there lived a senior tax collector called Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was passing through the town and he wanted to see Jesus.

[3 : 27] But there was a bit of a problem because there was a big crowd pressing around Jesus, as there often was, and Zacchaeus was a very short man. So he eagerly ran on ahead, up the street, he climbed a tree, he peered down through the branches of the tree to see the famous preacher coming along, and he was spotted by Jesus.

Now did you notice the fast pace at which the story moves? Zacchaeus, we're told here in verse 4, ran on ahead. That's a rather undignified way for a senior tax collector to behave, isn't it?

To run. And then he climbs a tree. It's a difficult thing when you've got skirts and robes around you, isn't it? Some of you men haven't climbed a tree for at least 40 years, have you?

I can tell that by just looking at you. But Zacchaeus was so keen to see Jesus that he hoisted himself aloft and he risked making himself look thoroughly ridiculous. And then notice the words hurrying in verses 5 and 6.

Jesus says to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down. So, verse 6, he hurried and came down and invited Jesus in. So there's a sense of urgency in the whole encounter.

[4 : 33] Zacchaeus is urgent to see Jesus, and Jesus is equally urgent to meet him and to come into his house. And did you notice the word joyfully at the end of verse 6?

Zacchaeus' eyes are shining as he opens the front door and welcomes Jesus into his home and no doubt prepares a hasty meal for him, or perhaps gets his wife to do that. Verse 7 we'll come to later.

Then Zacchaeus says to Jesus how he's now going to live a completely new life of honesty and generosity. And Jesus, realizing that these words express Zacchaeus' new faith in him, says, Today, again it's a word of hurry and immediacy, Today, not at some future point, but here and now, 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.

So it's a very simple story. And you can see why this is such a favorite with children. It's the sort of story that often is used in Sunday school. I haven't checked this out, but I imagine if you were to go to our book room at the back there and look through the children's Bibles, some of you may be planning to buy a children's Bible for a grandchild or a nephew or niece for Christmas.

If you find an abridged children's Bible, almost certainly this story will not have been abridged out of it. This story will be there. It's a great one for the artists anyway, isn't it? To have Zacchaeus up the tree and peering down through the leaves and so on.

[6 : 00] Now let's take our spades, as it were, and see if we can dig below the surface and unearth some of the treasures and truths of this story. I've got three main points. First, Jesus is interested in rank outsiders.

Zacchaeus is one of the last people that you would expect to become a follower of Jesus. You'd expect nice people to become Christians, wouldn't you?

Not a man like this, a man who's been spending years feathering his nest at the taxpayer's expense. Think of yourself as one of the people of Jericho. You, the taxpayer, have been paying your taxes to Zacchaeus knowing full well that he keeps a great proportion of the tax under his own mattress and only sends a certain amount of it to the government.

There's something rather modern, something very contemporary about this, isn't there? If you have a savings account at your bank, you will know that over the last 12 months or so, it has been earning you about 2p a month.

In other words, nothing. Now, if you were to find yourself having tea with one of the senior executives of your bank, and if he were to tell you that he was receiving a six-figure bonus this year on top of his six-figure salary, I think you would choke on your crumpet and butter, wouldn't you?

[7 : 22] Would you invite him to come here to church? Or would you say to him, you are an award-winning brigand. You're a pirate. Your bank pays me 2p a month while it pays you a six-figure bonus.

Now, friends, I'm no expert on banking and money at all. Maybe I'm being harsh on our bankers. But you get the point, don't you, that I'm making. The frustration and bad feeling that many people have against our bankers is very similar to the way people felt about chief tax collectors like Zacchaeus.

In fact, a man like Zacchaeus would have been disliked for two reasons. First, because it was well known throughout the Roman Empire that the tax collectors, this was a normal practice, they would overcharge their clientele and they would keep large sums of money for themselves.

But secondly, any Jew who willingly worked for the Romans was regarded as something of a traitor to his own people. Now, Zacchaeus was a Jew and yet he was in the pay of the occupying power, the Romans.

He'd become a cog in the government machinery of the Roman Empire. And yet Jesus is interested in this man. And his interest is all the more striking when you look at the bigger picture of what Jesus is doing here in Luke's Gospel.

[8 : 43] No need to turn this up, but there's a key moment in Luke's Gospel at chapter 9, verse 51, when Luke tells us that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And from that point onward, it's really the central point of Luke's Gospel. Jesus is purposefully and rather hurriedly making for the capital city. He knows that his mission is now reaching its climax and that he has to get to Jerusalem so that the great events of his death and resurrection can now take place.

So from the end of chapter 9 onwards, Luke regularly reminds us that Jesus is on the move. Yes, he stops here and he stops there and he gives various pieces of teaching and he meets various people, but there's an unmistakable sense of a goal which must now be reached.

So for example, at chapter 17, verse 11, Luke says, on the way to Jerusalem, he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. Or look at chapter 18, verse 35.

As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. Now look at chapter 19, verse 1. He entered Jericho and was passing through.

[9 : 56] So he was purposeful. He's on his way. Jerusalem is in his sights. He hasn't come to Jericho to spend time there. He hasn't come to spend three weeks in the king's arms looking at the local scenery and enjoying locally sourced food.

He's passing through, which makes it all the more striking that he should be willing to take the time to come to Zacchaeus' house. If he'd been more like a certain type of Eastern potentate, he might have marched up the main street of Jericho with his retinue of servants bowing around him and he would have had no time to stop and engage with local people.

If somebody from the crowd had called out to him, can I have a word with you, please, sir? He would have said, of course not. I'm far too busy and far too important to look at a rodent like you.

Who do you think I am? Florence Nightingale? Well, call me your excellence in. Stand back. Now, he wasn't that sort of person at all. He was the complete opposite. Yes, he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, but not so much in a hurry that he didn't have time to stop for Zacchaeus.

In fact, he was very eager to meet him and talk with him. Look at verse 5. The first words that passed between the two of them were not, Jesus, can I have a moment of your time?

- [11 : 16] They were, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down. I must stay at your house today. I must. This is the very thing I want to do more than anything else. I must spend time with you.
- I must be received by you. So, this story opens up for us a most comforting facet of Jesus' nature. And that is that he regards nobody as beyond the pale.
- He is deeply and lovingly interested in this man whom other people would regard as a rank outsider. There's no such thing as a rank outsider for Jesus.
- He came to seek and to save the lost. The rank outsider is the very person that Jesus came looking for. But isn't this true as well that actually there is no such person as the insider?
- I mean, all of us who have been rescued by Christ and that's many who are here tonight, all of us who are Christians started life beyond the pale. When I was a little boy I was interested in fighting other boys and winning my fights.
- [12 : 26] I was interested in pulling my sister's plants and indulging my appetite for food and selfish pleasures. But I can tell you this, I didn't love God. I knew him as well as I knew the Emperor of Japan.
- I knew as much about God as I knew about the Loch Ness Monster, a creature that might possibly be real but had no bearing on my life at all. I was a complete outsider as far as the Lord was concerned.
- So were all of us, even those of you who were brought up in Christian families. If you were brought up in a Christian family you had a great advantage but you weren't born a Christian. Nobody is.
- Even you who were raised in a Christian family, you were into plat pulling as well, weren't you? Own up to it. And yet Jesus deeply loves the outsider.
- He wouldn't have stopped at the foot of that sycamore tree and looked up into it if he didn't. Now second, some people intensely dislike Jesus' interest in rank outsiders.
- [13 : 35] Now this is where verse 7 comes in. Just have a look with me at verse 7 again. When they saw it, that's the members of the crowd, the people of Jericho, when they saw it they all grumbled.
- He's gone in to be the guest of a man who's a sinner. Now who is being criticised in that verse, would you say?
- At first sight it looks as if Zacchaeus is the main butt of the criticism. The crowd voiced their opinion of him as a sinner, a scoundrel, the man we all love to hate.
- But really it is Jesus who is being criticised in verse 7. This crowd have known Zacchaeus for years. They've formed their opinion of him long ago.
- They've long held him in contempt. But Jesus is new. His reputation has been rapidly spreading around Palestine as a miracle worker and a teacher.
- [14 : 32] People are even asking if he's some kind of a prophet. In fact we know from a point earlier in the Gospel that some people were speculating that he might be Elijah returned or even John the Baptist come back from the dead.
- So one of the reasons why people are flocking around him is that they want to see him for themselves. They want to make up their own minds about who he might be. And as soon as the crowd see Jesus going to Zacchaeus' house their opinion of him drops like a stone.
- What kind of a prophet is this who goes having afternoon tea with a wretch like Zacchaeus? Has this prophet no discernment? Can't he see that Zacchaeus is a cheat and a rascal?

If this Jesus really were a holy man he'd spend his time with morally squeaky clean people. He wouldn't go besmirching himself with people like Zacchaeus. Now the fact is that Jesus was regularly being criticised by people for this kind of perceived failing.

So for example back in Luke chapter 5 Jesus calls another tax collector a man called Levi. He calls him to follow him and Levi immediately gets up from his desk and he follows him. And Levi's first reaction perhaps the very same evening is to open up his home and host a great banquet, a feast for Jesus.

[15 : 50] And he invites all his tax collector friends to come along to the banquet. And there are Pharisees and scribes present as well. And they grumble to Jesus' disciples, why do you people eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

In other words, don't you realise that these people are morally corrupt? They're full of moral pus. Truly religious people seek out people like themselves to have dinner with. Upstanding people of noble character.

What kind of holiness is this that consorts with the moral dregs? Now Jesus says to them at Levi's dinner party, those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick.

I've not come to call the righteous, I've come to call sinners to repentance. Now that's exactly what Jesus is doing with Zacchaeus. And yet the people of Jericho, just like the Pharisees at Levi's house at his dinner party, are scandalised that this supposedly perceptive prophet should be interested in the scum of the earth.

So what do we learn from verse 7 in our passage? We learn that human nature has a deeply rooted self-righteousness that is horrible in the sight of God.

[17 : 07] That verse 7 is there to instruct us about the reality of our own hearts. there is something in us that we'll always want to say to Jesus, Lord, the right thing for you to do, the right way for you to behave is to reward morally upright behaviour.

Let the gold star system of personal merit operate within the universe. That's the right way. Reward people with gold stars. So for example, five gold stars for marital fidelity, four gold stars for the person who declares everything he should to the inland revenue, three gold stars for the person who never tells a lie, two gold stars for those who carefully recycle all their reusables, one gold star for those who love their pets and eat five fruits a day.

That's the way that a good moral God ought to behave. A good God should recognise merit when he sees it and he should reward it. Now the gospel completely undermines that kind of self righteousness.

The gospel is all about utter grace to the utterly undeserving. C.S. Lewis once walked into a room where a number of his fellow academics were discussing the question of different religions and which one might be better than others.

And when Lewis approached this little group, one of them signalled to him and said, ah Lewis, come across, you can help us here. What makes your Christianity different from all other religions? Lewis said, the answer is quite simple.

[18 : 36] Grace. All other religions operate fundamentally on a gold star system of merit, or if you like, self-righteousness.

Earn your stars and you'll be accepted. It's only the gospel that tells us the truth, and that is that the real God in the person of Jesus has come looking for the sinners of this world, the morally corrupt, and he has come so as to bring them salvation, free, gracious, rescue, gratis.

Jesus has come eagerly looking for the Zacchaeuses of this world, and the morally upright people have grumbled against him and have rejected him and have thus shut themselves out of his kingdom.

Verse 7 is there to get under our skins and provoke us. If we find ourselves siding with the grumblers of Jericho, we're in danger of being self-righteous just like them.

But if, on the other hand, we delight in the rescue of those who are morally sick, if we love to see Jesus take a life that is full of moral pus and restore it and remake it, then we are beginning to understand grace.

[19 : 54] We're beginning to see how Jesus has taken hold of our own pussy lives and has given us joy instead of mourning, peace instead of conflict and purpose instead of brokenly limping from one episode of disaster to the next.

If I gave you the impression a few minutes ago that the worst thing I ever did was to pull my sister's plaits, then I gave you a misleading impression. The truth about me is that before I became a Christian, I lived the very worst kind of human life.

That is, I lived without God. I wanted to know him no more than I wanted to walk to the South Pole. He was utterly beyond my sight. I needed rescuing every bit as much as Zacchaeus did.

When people grumble against Jesus because he is so interested in shockingly awful sinners like Zacchaeus, they bar their own way into the kingdom of God.

Well, we've seen first that Jesus is very interested in rank outsiders and then second, that some people deeply dislike his interest in people like Zacchaeus.

[21 : 07] Now let's see third and last, how Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. The whole story from verse 1 to verse 10 is about a transformation that took place in Zacchaeus' life.

We're not told a great deal about this man. We don't know all the ins and outs of his psychological or emotional life. We only have the bare bones of this story. It's quite possible that Luke, the writer, personally met Zacchaeus maybe 20 or 30 years after the event, when Luke was doing his careful historical research, when he was collecting the material for his gospel.

Certainly we don't have this story in any of the other three gospels, which suggests that Luke might have met Zacchaeus personally, whereas Matthew and Mark and John didn't. But if these ten verses are the consequences of a meeting between Zacchaeus and Luke, I think we can imagine Zacchaeus telling his own story in his own words to the evangelist.

Perhaps the fast pace of the story and the joyful tone reflect the enthusiasm with which Zacchaeus told his story in later life. This moment, after all, was the transforming event of his life.

Verse 8 tells of the moral transformation that Zacchaeus underwent. the heart of his moral disorder, or the heart of the way he expressed his moral disorder, was in cheating and thieving.

[22 : 30] And then after being rescued by Jesus, his life became one of generosity and restoring people the things that he'd stolen from them. No longer was he fleecing the poor, his life became one of generosity and looking after them.

Moral transfiguration will always mark a life that is truly converted to Christ. It's not the moral change that merits the salvation, it's the salvation that produces the moral change.

Zacchaeus only says what he says in verse 8 because he has already received Jesus joyfully in verse 6. But it's verses 9 and 10 that I particularly want us to notice.

Jesus says in verse 9, Zacchaeus also is a son of Abraham. That is why salvation has come to this house today. Now that's an intriguing thing for Jesus to say.

After all, weren't all Jews sons of Abraham? Just look at the logic of verse 9. Where was Zacchaeus, if I can put it like this, yesterday?

[23 : 40] Where was he yesterday? If today salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house, presumably yesterday, Zacchaeus was a stranger to salvation. He was still a lost soul.

It's the arrival of Jesus and Zacchaeus' joyful welcome of Jesus which has opened the door to salvation. As Zacchaeus opened the physical front door to his house and welcomed Jesus in, he was opening the door of his heart to salvation.

And in doing that, he was becoming a true son of Abraham. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament explicitly recognized that there are two types of Jew.

On the one hand, there are those who love Abraham and trust, sorry, who love Abraham's God and trust God in the way that Abraham did. Abraham, you remember, is famous in the Old Testament for putting his faith in God.

He's the man of faith. So to be a son of Abraham is to put real trust in God. That is to be a real Jew as the Bible sees it. But on the other hand, there are plenty of Jews in both the Old Testament and the New Testament who may be Abraham's descendants by blood, but don't share his saving faith in Israel's God.

[24 : 52] Therefore, salvation is not theirs. They're Jews by blood, but they're lost. And the New Testament shows us that the only way for the Jew to be saved is to come to Christ, to trust him and to receive him joyfully as Zacchaeus did.

Then that Jew becomes a true son of Abraham because he displays the distinguishing mark of Abraham, which is faith. And we mustn't imagine that Jews and Gentiles are somehow saved on a different basis.

What is source for the goose is source for the gander. Gentiles, just like Jews, can only come to salvation as they receive Jesus joyfully. And therefore, the Gentile who becomes a Christian also becomes a true child of Abraham.

Have you thought of it that way? You may be a Gentile. I guess most here are Gentiles. But if you're a Christian, you're a true child of Abraham. That's why we can sing in one of our hymns, Hail Abraham's God and ours.

Or, Hail Abraham's God and mine. So when Jesus saves a lost person, he's bringing that lost person into membership of Abraham's family, which is God's real family, God's real people.

[26 : 04] This means that a Christian Gentile belongs to Abraham's family in a way that a non-Christian Jew doesn't.

Abraham's real family, the family of saving faith, are all those Jews and Gentiles who have received Jesus and have submitted to him. And just look at how Jesus describes himself in verse 10.

He's not simply the son of David or of Abraham. He's the son of Adam. He's the son of man. He's come to save people from every quarter of the globe.

He's here for mankind, not only for the Jews. The darkest day in human history was the day when Adam became a lost soul.

And Eve as well. They defied the God who had made them and who loved them. In opting for self-rule, they chose death.

[27 : 06] And in choosing death, they involved all of their descendants with them. The whole human race has defied the loving authority of God.

That is why by nature we're in the dark. It's the darkness of death. To be a lost soul is to live in defiance of God, to assert one's independence of him.

When Jesus speaks of somebody being lost, what does he mean? He doesn't mean that that person is confused or misguided or is suffering from psychological problems or is having an identity crisis.

He's talking about eternal lostness, about being on the road to hell, about being forever cut off from the everlasting joys of heaven. That is why Jesus came two thousand and odd years ago to Bethlehem to be born as a human being.

God was not content for Adam's race to remain lost. He loves the human beings that he has made. It's his determination, it's his desire to rescue precious souls that are far from him.

[28 : 18] Now I know that many of us who are here tonight are saved by Christ and we rejoice in that fact deeply. We rejoice to be members of Abraham's family. In fact sometimes we are so overjoyed that we can hardly believe that God could be quite so gracious to us.

But I imagine there are others here tonight who are still lost. And if that's you, Luke the evangelist has written down this story for your benefit.

The story of Zacchaeus is here to show you what can happen. Be like Zacchaeus. That's the message. Cast caution to the winds.

Hurry to meet Jesus. Don't be put off by what your friends might think of you. Remember how Zacchaeus was prepared to be most undignified. He picked up the skirts of his robe and he ran up the street and he climbed up the tree and he risked looking like a prized twerp as he peered down through the branches.

But see how Jesus responded to this man who had cast caution to the winds. He saw him and he called him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down. I must stay at your house today.

[29 : 30] Now that's what Jesus says to every lost soul. Hurry, hurry. I must stay with you. I must be your guest. I must take up residence with you and transform your life. If you are a lost soul, why are you here tonight?

Did you come by accident? Were you standing at the door at 625 and you felt the wind blow chilly and you thought I must go in and have a refuge from the cold? Of course not.

The Lord surely brought you here so that you should listen to the story of Zacchaeus and so that you should respond to Jesus as Zacchaeus did. Do you want to hear Jesus saying to you, today salvation has come to your house and you too are a child of Abraham?

You'd be mad not to. Jesus is the one to come to. He is the one to receive joyfully. He came for this very purpose.

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

[30 : 50] Dear God, our Father, have mercy, we pray upon us. Help us indeed to receive Jesus joyfully if we've never done this before. And for those who have, we pray that you'll fill our hearts afresh with joy and wonder that you should have sought out outsiders like us who had no love for you and did not belong.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.