

## Today Salvation Has Come

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### Text: Luke 19:1-10

The story given in the Gospel reading is short. There are only four lines of dialogue, spoken by three different voices. Jesus, then the crowd, then Zacchaeus, and finally Jesus again. The lines recorded are probably a summary report of a much more extensive conversation. But it is possible that this is all there was; that in a miraculous way these simple statements contained everything that was on people's hearts. Like the miracle of the loaves and fishes, when just a few fragments of food fed thousands, these four lines could have been filled with enormous content. We don't know, of course; and it is not important to know. We do know that a lot of ground was covered in a very short time. Let's look at this drama, and as we hear words spoken let's consider what lies behind them.

The first line was Jesus': "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (v. 5) Here Jesus set up the confrontation. Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector. He was the chief tax collector, which meant that he had others working for him. One thing we know about tax collectors at that time was that they were corrupt. Luke earlier records that when tax collectors asked John the Baptist what repentance meant for them, John's response was "stop collecting more money than required." We know that Zacchaeus was no different because in the end he offered to pay restitution to those he had overcharged.

Jesus came to this white-collar offender, this leader of a criminal enterprise, and said two things. First, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately." Jesus got Zacchaeus into the crowd; he brought the offender together with his victims. This was an important first step, because they had become accustomed to separation. The crowd had no time for Zacchaeus and no interest in letting him join them. In fact, they were so hostile they would not let him through to see (he was too short to catch a glimpse of Jesus over their heads). And Zacchaeus had removed himself from the crowd as well. As Jesus walked through Jericho, Zacchaeus was perched above the others, safe in the limbs of a sycamore tree. Jesus' first act was to bring the two together.

Then he said something entirely unexpected: "I must stay at your house today." We can imagine the shock that ran through the crowd. This "Holy Man" is willing

to be entertained by a criminal? Unbelievable! And this outrageous request began a dialogue that was ultimately redemptive.

It was almost as if at this point Jesus stepped back and let the others talk. Like a good facilitator of a victim-offender mediation or other restorative justice process, he didn't leave; he stayed right there listening and watching. Who would speak first?

It was the crowd. "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner," they mutter (v. 7). We hear in these words deep pain and disappointment. What Jesus was doing was so offensive. It was a betrayal of everything they had hoped for from him.

A problem with stories from the Bible is that they become so familiar we don't experience them as they must have happened. I remember telling my son this story when he was about four. In his mind Zacchaeus was the hero of the story; after all he changed in the end. It was wrong of the crowd to be upset at Jesus, he thought; they should have been happy for Zacchaeus.

I tried to help him understand how the crowd felt. "Suppose someone came here to play with you, and every time they came, they stole a favourite toy. That would be wrong, wouldn't it? You would feel bad. Suppose one day Jesus came to our house while you and this child were playing, and Jesus said to the kid who has been stealing from you, 'Hey, let's leave for awhile have a snack together!'"

All of a sudden, as I told him the story, I felt angry at Jesus. How could he even appear to side with the person who was hurting my son! Why chose that delinquent over Michael to share a snack! I felt so disappointed. And I understood some of what the crowd must have felt as they muttered the shocked words "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner!"

Behind those words we hear words of pain. We hear stories, victims' stories. It is as though every person in the crowd who had been harmed by Zacchaeus or his men had a chance to tell their story. As though the past 12 weeks of stories here at the Sycamore Tree Project were telescoped into a single moment.

There was something about Jesus that made it possible for people to tell their stories. Jesus liked to listen and talk to people. Remember how he scolded his disciples when little children wanted to come see him? Remember how he told Martha, busy getting a meal ready, that her sister Mary who sat talking with Jesus had chosen the best thing? Jesus liked conversations, and he seemed to have been a good listener.

It is too bad that Jesus' followers today aren't more like him in this regard. We who call ourselves Christians need to become better at listening to victim's stories. At hearing what they have to say.

But Jesus wasn't the only one listening. Zacchaeus had also been listening. The time had come for his line: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." (v.8) This was a man under conviction. He was facing what he has done and was accepting responsibility to make things right.

Our impulse, when charged with doing something wrong, is to defend ourselves. We put ourselves in the best light possible, and marshal arguments in our favour. The adversarial nature of the criminal justice system encourages that. It is built on the premise that truth becomes evident when we pit competing stories against each other. That probably works more often than it fails, but an unfortunate consequence is that it encourages the natural, sinful tendency to put a good face on things. So offenders deny the truth when arrested, in pre-trial proceedings, during their trial, even at sentencing and through years of appeals. By the time there is no longer a tactical reason (legally speaking) to lie, the lie has become so entrenched that it is unlikely the truth will be acknowledged.

Zacchaeus had undoubtedly become good at self-justification over the years. But on this day, he stopped justifying and listened. There was something about the presence of Jesus that made him admit what he had been doing. He realised that truth is not something for others to discover and prove; truth is something to acknowledge and disclose.

And with truth came responsibility. Responsibility to face what his actions had caused in the lives of others. Responsibility to make things right.

Convicted, he promised to do two things. First, to give half his wealth to the poor. This is a kind of community service, recognising the intangible harm he had caused the city of Jericho and the entire tax district. Second, he promised to pay back fourfold anyone he had cheated. This is restitution. Restitution was the basic principle of justice in Hebrew law. If you caused harm, justice required that you make things right. Zacchaeus promised to do that.

This brings us to the final line in this short dialogue. It was Jesus who spoke. He had set up this confrontation and his presence had guided the interaction toward a redemptive outcome. And that is what he pointed out: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham." (v. 9) We can tell that Jesus was pleased.

Now we understand why Jesus stopped to talk to Zacchaeus in the first place. He wanted to bring salvation into this conflict. Not cheap grace to a wealthy criminal, but genuine repentance and transformation. Not just punishment of a criminal, but restoration of community peace, for "this man too is a son of Abraham." Sure, Zacchaeus had always been a Jew, but he was also a collaborator with Rome and abused his power to plunder fellow citizens. His actions had set him outside the community, and now, Jesus noted, his actions

restored him to it. “Today salvation has come to this house,” and to the community as well.

Salvation had come and we can imagine the celebration. But after “today” came “tomorrow.” The story ended here, but life did not. It went on for each of the players in this drama. Think about it. The next day Zacchaeus had to start making a list of his victims, begin liquidating his assets to pay his debts. He had to start visiting people to calculate the losses and to pay them back. To learn to live on less money. To change his tax collecting practices, as well as those of the men who worked for him.

The next day the crowd had to decide how to treat Zacchaeus. Would they take the next courageous steps in re-establishing a constructive relationship? Or would they continue to live in hostility? They had to decide, and to act on that decision.

By the next day, Jesus had already left Jericho. He was on his way to Jerusalem to die. Within a week of the day he stood at the foot of a sycamore tree he was hanging from a cross. For Jesus had come to do more than reconcile a criminal to his victims. Jesus had come to reconcile sinners to God. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (v 10).

Prison Fellowship International has developed a program around this story. We call it The Sycamore Tree Project. STP brings groups of victims into prison to meet with groups of offenders. (They are not each others’ victims and offenders.) They meet weekly for 4-6 weeks, going through a prepared curriculum that reviews biblical teaching on crime, confession, repentance, forgiveness, restitution and reconciliation. In the course of that time they are given opportunities to share their personal experiences with crime with one another.

At the end of the session, the prisoners either prepare letters as though they were going to send them to their own victims, or covenants that they would like to make with God about how they will make reparation for their offenses. They present this to their group, and the victims in the group help them understand how those letters might be received. The victims are given a similar opportunity: they can either write a letter as though to their offender, or prepare a plan for taking charge of the losses – emotional, spiritual, financial, physical – that they have experienced from their crime.

It is a simple program, but it has profound impacts. Listen to the comments made by victims and offenders at a celebration luncheon at the end of their project. This particular program took place in New Zealand at the Hawkes Bay Prison. Local dignitaries were invited to the session to listen, and several of them stood to comment as well.

## **Comments from under the Sycamore Tree at Hawkes Bay Regional prison, NZ**

### **Dave – Inmate**

For years I have been without love – when I received it during this programme, I opened up a lot. I'm in here for trying to kill my partner. Up to now, I treated it as a crime of passion. Now I know it was attempted murder. Things will improve – the healing has begun.

### **Tyrone – Inmate**

I'm doing ten years for rape. Until the 8 October, I didn't care. I went on courses because they offered food at the same time. This is the only one that has meant something to me – I have talked in detail about my crime. It was awesome – I can't believe I'm standing up here telling a bunch of strangers all this.

### **Ray – Inmate**

I'm in for murder – I killed my ex-partner. For the first time in prison, I've started speaking from the heart – this programme has brought out the honesty in me. God loves you and so do I.

### **Cecilia – Victim**

I witnessed a man murdering my father. I have been carrying this hatred and hurt for more than 25 years. For the first time, I can truly say that I have forgiven the man that murdered my father. The feeling is something I can't describe.

### **Warren – Inmate**

This programme has the potential to stop offending and re-offending. I was given a chance to be heard. I wasn't judge, and I started to take responsibility. It's taken me back to a life of Trust". Before I can deal with my problems, I have to deal with my own behaviour. I intend to keep up the passion and honesty of whanau. My children will be saved from a life of crime.

### **Cheryl - Victim**

I knew that I had addressed the trauma of being raped as an 18 year old in my head. As a 43 year old, I am now dealing with it in my heart.

### **Danny – Inmate**

I thought I'd come to a point of forgiveness to my parents about ten years ago. This programme made me realise that I had some way to go. I've learnt to let go of my hurts and fears. This programme has put backbone into my forgiveness.

### **John – Inmate:**

As a cannabis grower, I thought I was conducting a community service. I gave no thought to the flow-on effect. I have now come to terms with the impact of what I have done on others.

### **Diane – City Councillor (Guest at the Celebration Lunch)**

I'm overwhelmed by what I've witnessed today. I've never been in such a loving, feeling atmosphere. This room was just brimming over with love.

**Jack – City councillor (Guest at the Celebration Lunch)**

I'm in an insincere business. This would have to be one of the most sincere experiences I've had.

**John – City Mayor (Guest at the Celebration Lunch)**

One of the most humbling experiences – we must do this programme again and again.

Today we can celebrate what has happened in New Zealand, and in many other countries around the world. Perhaps soon these meetings will take place in Western Australia. In the meantime, today we celebrate with those victims and offenders elsewhere who have come together in the presence of Jesus.

“Today salvation has come.” This is a statement of fact, and a statement of faith. It is fact because Jesus said it; it is faith because we won't really know until we see what happens tomorrow. Whatever happens, we can know that Jesus is with us. His presence forces us to face what we would rather avoid, it helps us express what we have had to bear alone, it brings us through conflict, pain and loss into transformation and redemption.

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”