

Good News for the Rich

A sermon on Luke 19:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 November 2019

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Message

Christ's gratuitous forgiveness and acceptance always manage to scandalise us, but it is our willingness to embrace them that saves us.

Sermon

Some biblical stories suffer a great deal from their overuse in Sunday school picture books. The child-friendly pictures completely inoculate us against the shock of their message. The story of Zacchaeus is one such story. The fact that Zacchaeus was a little person and that he climbed a tree make it readily appealing to children, but it was not written as a children's story. But those of us who got brought up in Sunday schools have great difficulty hearing past the Sunday school version to see what else it might be saying.

If we had not heard the story before, and had been just reading our way through the gospel according to Luke, we would find that Luke has set us up for shock in this story. He has hammered away at a particular theme for the last eighteen chapters, and then in this story he turns it on its head and pulls the rug out from under us.

Of the four gospel writers, Luke is the one who has the most to say about the evils of wealth and the way that Jesus consistently took the side of the poor. It is there from the start. Even before Jesus is born, his mother is singing the praise of God who feeds the poor and sends the rich away hungry. Luke is the one who says that Jesus was born homeless, in a shed behind a pub, and was visited, not by kings, but by poor sheep herders.

In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus does not say "Blessed are the poor in Spirit," but "blessed are the poor." Full stop. And then for good measure he adds, "Woe to you who are rich, for there is nothing more in store for you."

In recent weeks we have heard the parable of the rich fool who has a bumper year, stores it all up for himself and dies, unable to take anything with him; a story only found in Luke. We have heard the story of the rich man who ignored poor Lazarus lying at his gate, and when both died, found himself in hell, tormented by visions of Lazarus in paradise. Another story found only in Luke.

And then just shortly before tonight's story, we have the story of the rich young man who comes to Jesus asking how he might be saved. That one's found in Matthew and Mark too, but you can be quite sure that Luke was never going to leave it out. After establishing that the young man has always been a meticulous keeper of the commandments, Jesus tells him to sell everything he owns, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. The rich young man walks away shattered, unable to give up his wealth.

And what does Jesus say in commentary. It would be easier to for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into the kingdom of God. Story upon story has hammered home this point until we almost feel we can finish Luke's stories for him as soon as he has identified the social and financial status of the characters.

So when the story of Zacchaeus begins, we've been well primed. Luke introduces him with almost staged seriousness.

As Jesus was passing through Jericho, a man was there.

A man named Zacchaeus.

He was a chief tax collector. Read: despised traitor who was collaborating with the Romans and profiteering from it by cheating ordinary poor people into paying too much tax and then pocketing the difference. That's how the system worked, they all did it.

A man was there. A man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector, ... and he was filthy rich.

Okay Luke, we get the picture. All our hands shoot up in the air. We know how it is going to go. He wants to see Jesus, but when he does Jesus will give him a serve about his money and he'll have to choose between his money and following Jesus. Easy peasy. Next story please.

But no. Luke has set us up beautifully, and now, out comes the rug!

Jesus spots Zacchaeus up his tree and says, "Zacchaeus, hurry down at once, because I want to stay at your place tonight. And Zacchaeus nearly falls out of his tree with excitement, welcomes Jesus into his home and dinner's on.

Notice who is grumbling this time. We've had a few of these stories where Jesus goes out to dinner with riff raff from the streets, and each time we've been told that the devout Pharisees and the religious experts grumbled about it. "He's going to dinner with the religiously impure. It's not on. It's a scandal. How can we take him seriously as a prophet?" And each time we are given a picture of some stuck up holier-than-thou types grumbling, while everyone else rejoices and is happy to party with Jesus.

But is it the holier-than-thous grumbling this time? No! This time it says that everyone who saw it began to grumble. When it says that, you are supposed to hear, "all the people who were just like us began to grumble, saying, 'he has gone to be the guest of some rich thieving scum.'"

And Luke's not finished rubbing salt in our wounds yet. What happens at dinner at Zacchaeus's place? Zacchaeus stands up during dinner and says to Jesus, "Look Lord, I'm going to give away half of my possessions to the poor." And before we can think, "Aha. Jesus will get you now. Half's not enough. It's the whole lot for you, mister," Jesus is on his feet saying "Today salvation has come to this house. This bloke too is one of God's chosen ones, just the sort of person I was sent to save."

What?!! It's an outrage! And I don't know about you, but I'm not even sure how serious Zacchaeus was about his offer, or whether Jesus was going to hold him to it. It sounds to me like the words of an over-excited man who has had five or six too many glasses of scotch at the party. "Look, halff of my posseshions, I'll gives away to zhe poor, and ivv I've ripped anyshbody off, I'll pay shem back three timesh over! No, what zhe heck, make it your!"

If you think Jesus has just come as a social revolutionary to restructure society so that inequality and injustice are removed, think again. If that was all God was setting out to do, he would have just anointed some prophets and social reforming politicians. The mission of God in Jesus does include tackling injustice, but it is much bigger than that. And just in case we were thinking that that was what it was all about, Luke has set us up big time.

What we are encountering here is the scandalously gratuitous love and forgiveness of God in Jesus. In Jesus we see the one who was poor, and a refugee, and whose country was occupied by a foreign military power, and who had no place to lay his head, and who was falsely accused, and betrayed, and the victim of a miscarriage of justice, and was flogged and tortured to death. In him we encounter the ultimate victim of the brutality and injustice that the world's wealthy and powerful elites manufacture, maintain and profit from. And here in this story we see exactly what we encounter now in the risen Christ. We see the ultimate stomped over victim, standing risen and free, and utterly without resentment, offering a welcome and a forgiveness that is so outrageously gratuitous that it is virtually incomprehensible to us.

And not only is it virtually incomprehensible to us, but it is scandalous to the point of being grossly offensive. Luke has had a great time depicting the religious holier-than-thous being offended by Jesus's scandalous inclusiveness, but now he's turning his sights on us. Now he's drawing pictures of people we don't like, of people who we regard as filthy scum who the world would be better off without, and telling us that Jesus welcomed them just the same as us, and that by implication if we want to join the company of Jesus, we'd better be ready to learn to like these people.

It feels like kick in the guts, doesn't it? It is one thing to say that Jesus is including the poor victims who have been excluded and victimised, but it is quite another to say that Jesus is just as ready to accept and include the wealthy powerful victimisers. I find all sorts of things inside me rebelling against that. I'm wanting to stick with Habbakuk from tonight's first reading, and scream blue murder at God until he comes and sorts out the violence and injustice. But I'm not happy if God does come and what he does is not just save the downtrodden but welcome and accept their oppressors.

Luke is telling us that Jesus would be gratuitously forgiving and accepting to Clive Palmer and Gina Rinehart, to Mick Gatto and Ivan Milat, to George Pell and Peter Dutton, to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Donald Trump, to Nicholas Maduro and Vladimir Putin. Luke is telling us that the love and grace of Jesus makes absolutely no distinction between them and us. They and we are equally lost and in need of grace. Differently perhaps, but equally.

What happened to "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God"? Well, actually, when you look at it again, he didn't actually say that God would have trouble accepting a rich person into the Kingdom. He said that rich people have trouble accepting the invitation. When you're used to being able to buy or manoeuvre your way into anything, it is often hard to let go and accept something as a gift.

The poor have had more practice at accepting things they can't achieve for themselves. But when I find the spotlight turned back on me, I'm having trouble accepting it as a gift too. As long as I'm thinking that Donald Trump shouldn't be getting the same as me, I'm really implying that I've earned better, and that puts me up there with that Pharisee we heard about

last week praying “Thank you God that I’m not like that rich, bragging, power-mongering despot over there.”

Luke has set me up and found me out. And now he’s telling us that the love and grace of God are so scandalous, that our ability to accept them for ourselves is actually tied to our ability to celebrate God’s offer of them to others, and to begin to see ourselves as united with them. I don’t want to see myself as united to Peter Dutton. You know that prayer we sometimes pray that says “Rank me with whom you will...” Well I don’t think I’m going to find it easy to accept that whom God wills might be Mark Latham.

As galling as it might be, Luke is telling us that until we are ready to welcome Boris Johnson and Osama Bin Laden to the table – no strings attached, no pre-conditions – we are not yet ready to take our place at the table ourselves. We are saved by grace alone, by nothing other than accepting the free gift of undeserved grace in Jesus Christ, but as long as we are trying to tell God who else is and isn’t worthy to receive it, we haven’t actually accepted the gift ourselves. We’re still buying into the idea that it is for those who deserve it.

When we grasp that it is sheer gift, given with no strings attached to people we despise as much as to us, then we will know what it means to accept it or reject it. And unfortunately many will reject it rather than accept that they are no more worthy in God’s eyes than Robert Mugabe or Julian Knight. This is the table of scandalous grace, offensive grace. Here Jesus offers himself to all, without reserve, to all who will accept him and accept all who come with him.