

All Saints talk for Sunday 26th March 2023

Patrick Whitworth

Sermon Title: 'Be accepting'

Reading: *Luke 19:1-10* Zacchaeus the tax collector

As I said at the beginning with Olivia, it is wonderful to be here. And it came to me, that is just sitting there, there are a couple of words I want to say to you at the beginning; which is, well done. Well done for your love, well done for your faith, well done for praying. And well done for persevering, which is such an important Christian quality. And take that to heart and be encouraged by today. I also want to say congratulations, as well. Particularly, congratulations in finding, through God's help, a new leader and his wife in Tom and Mins. And I think it's just marvellous, you know, that they're here to lead you and to shepherd and pasture you as you go into your future. I thought if you ever needed help in finding a new vicar, I had a sort of patent method, which is one of these chain letters. And it goes like this. And this I thought when I was leaving, it said, parcel it up your vicar into a parcel and post him to a parish at the top of the list in this chain letter. And having done that, and having waited, you will receive 1167 clergy, one of which should be alright. Don't break this chain, one parish did and they got the old vicar back. Which is not what you want. So, yeah, it is great. It is great to be here. And to be with Tom and Mims, and all of you.

I want to say just a word more about the last seven years as far as we're concerned. And yes, the family has grown. I've done various things. I've kept writing books. And so I've published nearly six books since I saw you last over the last seven years. And there are two of them here by the way. One is on St. Luke's Gospel, which actually came out when I was here in the parish, but I've almost completed the foresome now and all the Gospels. And John will be coming out shortly. And then this other one, which is a slightly more lighthearted one about all the travel and stuff that I've done over the years, really since childhood, which I think is interesting, And you might find interesting, as well, Olivia's read it and she enjoyed it. So you know, there we are.

But what else? I just want to say that during lockdown, Olivia and I were sitting together in our kitchen, in our house and like everybody else, we're going online for services. And invariably, most Sundays, not every Sunday, but most Sundays, we would tune in to the service that was broadcast from here, the sanctuary service, week by week faithfully through that whole period of lockdown. You will never know really, the extent to which it was a blessing and encouragement to very many people who you didn't see or didn't know about. But who were listening in. So I pay credit to the team here and especially to Gary who's sitting there, for doing that. Because it wasn't easy. And yet, it was a great encouragement. Me for my own part, I did my bit of broadcasting from my little study or big study, I should say, in the house that we live in. And I was able to do three series of talks to the camera in the computer, you know, my laptop. And that was a whole new experience for me. And I really enjoyed doing it.

I when I left here, I thought I was relatively fit. Okay, but I had a hip operation. But in fact, over the last three or four years, I've been in the inside of a number of hospitals. And actually, as I said earlier, it goes through quite an interesting experience, almost enjoyable actually. experience I would say. So I was inside Basingstoke hospital quite briefly for replacement. It's all about replacement and repair really, and I was in Reading just before Christmas, 18 months ago for about eight or nine days. And then I went to St. Barts in October of last year and had what they call open heart surgery for a valve. And I learned a lot of things during that time. And these are my top tips, if you get into hospital, which I hope you don't, but if you do end up there. My first tip is don't think too much by yourself. Second is to pray. Thirdly, it's to tell the staff what an important job they're doing. And that was as much for the cleaner, the person who came and cleaned the floors, as it was for the surgeon who had the extraordinary thing of opening you up and doing everything. And to say, you're doing a hugely important job here. And I really appreciate it. And what you're doing is so important. I find that was my sort of general line with everybody. actually, they quite liked me, but by the end! Having a patient around who said that kind of thing. And the other thing, because of being a chap who was writing stuff, I gave him a booklet, I said, if you're interested in the Christian life, I've written this little booklet here. And you can read it. And so I gave to a few patients and a few members of staff, and I'll give one to you for free. They're on the back there. And they're not many, I think we've sort of stopped writing these kinds of things, short things which explained

simply what Christian lives about. That it needn't be a whole big mystery, that there is actually a quite a simple way in, albeit profound. So there we are, those are my top tips. Should you ever be there and generally for life as well.

So then, let's come to Zacchaeus now, in this wonderful story, in Luke, chapter 19. I want you to notice a few things as we begin. And the first thing is that Jesus was on the move. He was entering Jericho, which that famous city, down around the Dead Sea area, and we're told he was passing through. He was not going to be staying there very long. Because in fact, in the middle, or the end of this chapter, chapter 19, we find that Jesus is in Jerusalem, and that he is now beginning the final and last week of his life, the Passion narrative, which we'll be thinking about, in a week's time. So he's passing through Jericho, before he's going up to Jerusalem. And just before we get fully into the story itself, I want to take you to the last verse, which is verse 10. I'm going to read from verse nine. This is Jesus's summary of what happens after his meeting with Zacchaeus. He says about it 'today, salvation, has come to this house, because this man too, is a son of Abraham.' And then he goes on to say, as a sort of final summary sentence about this whole episode, 'for the Son of Man,' of course, that Jesus Himself 'came to seek, and to save what was lost.' I don't know if you know about this, but of all the Gospels, St. Luke's gospel is the gospel in which the idea of being lost is to be found. More than any of the others it's a kind of favorite phrase, of Luke, and you find it in his Gospel cropping up in a number of different places. For instance, in Luke 15, which I know that you looked at not so long ago, when we have the parable of the lost son, the parable of the lost coin, and the lost sheep. It's all about someone who has been lost being found. Zacchaeus, who we come to here, is a person who has been lost, and is in the process of being found by Jesus. And then last of all, one of the other characters in the Gospel who comes right at the very end, is the dying thief. And I love that conversation between Jesus as he dies on the cross, and the dying thief who's next next to him. And he says, doesn't he, 'remember me, when you come into your kingdom?' And Jesus says to him, 'today, you will be with Me in Paradise.' It's kind of the final picture almost in the Gospel of someone who had absolutely nothing to offer and was dying himself on the cross. He was utterly lost, being found, even in the extremis of death, both Jesus dying and the thief next door to him.

That's not much fun being lost, is it? You probably don't get lost very often now, because you have Sat Navs and other devices that you use in your car. But I remember as a child being lost fairly vividly. I was about nine or 10. We were living in France at the time, we went to a very big museum, I got separated from my parents. And I didn't know where they were, I didn't speak very good French. And all I could see was pictures all around me. Anyhow, I needn't have worried because they were seeking to see where I was, and eventually I was found. But it's not much fun being lost. And Zacchaeus, of course, as we will come to in a moment was a lost person. But there are people all around us who are lost, that is they don't have a direction in which to go, they don't really know where they are at the moment. And Jesus says at the end of this wonderful, short episode in Luke 19, about himself, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. One person who died quite recently, and whose obituary I read in the paper, I'm always reading obituaries, by the way, and she was a very well known actress, British actress. And earlier in her life. She wrote this and I wrote it down because I was so struck by it, she said I had acquired everything I wanted. Yet I was totally miserable. I thought it was very peculiar that I had acquired everything I had wanted as a child. Wealth, fame and accomplishment in my career. I had beautiful children and a lifestyle that seemed terrific. Yet I was totally and miserably unhappy. Well, of course, it's sad. It's not a question of feeling lost, when don't have anything. She, rather like Zacchaeus, had a whole lot of stuff, but she too expresses this idea of being lost or miserable even. So then let's come to Zacchaeus now, in the remaining part of my talk, that was just the introduction. And as usual, I have three things to say. Okay, some things don't change. They're very simple, very profound, very true. And the things you'll be able to remember and tell people in the street tomorrow when you're in Tesco's. What did the vicar say? That old boy, who came back. I heard he was in town.

The first thing is, is that Zacchaeus was short, not like my sermon. Zacchaeus was short. So let's read from verse one, Chapter 19. Jesus entered Jericho, as we've heard and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. Well, the fact that Zacchaeus was short was the dynamic in the story. Because he couldn't see over the crowd, because he was too little. I don't know what size he was? Maybe he was just over five foot,

I've no idea. Anyhow, he couldn't see over the crowd. So he could see a tree down the way and he ran down the street where Jesus was coming, he went up into the tree, and there he waited in amongst what was really a fig tree rather than a sycamore tree. Now, I don't know to what extent his stature, i.e a short man was a driver in his life? You know, the psychiatrists would have something to say about this and they'd say, Well, you know, he was very, very short so he needed to compensate because of that, and so he was rude and nasty to other people as a result. I don't know that necessarily, there was that connection, but you might want to think about it. Nevertheless, he ran ahead and he went up a tree. In order to see Jesus. He was short in stature. Secondly, this is not the second point, this is the second sub point of the first point. I don't want to raise your hopes too much! He was short of friends. He was short of friends. I don't think he had any. Now I love listening to the news, the BBC News, I hasten to say, on the radio, and also on the TV, I listened to it at 7am at 8am at 1pm at 5pm and at 10pm. So if you want to know anything about the news this day, I can tell you. And Olivia says I wish she wouldn't listen to the news so much. Anyhow, I do. And she will vouch for that. And I particularly enjoy Sarah Montague who does the one o'clock news and I think she's a very compassionate and interesting person. And she presents News at One. And one day, when I was listening as usual, to the news. She said we're going to have at the end of the program, some person who's done a lot of research on what makes people happy. I thought, well, he's done all that research and I'm just going to say, under my breath, what I think make people happy. So I said that to myself. And I listened to what this American who'd done all this research came up with. And he said, 'you know, whether you're rich or poor, whatever you are, what makes a person happy' pause 'is good relationships.' And that's exactly what I'd say to myself. So I felt very smug. And I thought, you know, we're on the same page. But it's absolutely true. And, as far as I can tell, Zacchaeus had thoroughly bad relationships with everybody. He was short of friends. After all, he was the chief tax collector. If you go to a dinner party, and you know, people say, what do you do? Perhaps that's not the right thing to say. But people say maybe, what do you do rather than where you come from? And and you say, You're a clergyman, and people don't quite know what to say next. But if you say I'm a tax collector, you know, that's my job, then almost certainly, probably most people think, Gosh, what did I do last year in my tax return. And so on. He was the chief tax collector. But more than that, he was extortionate. He took money where he shouldn't have taken money, he took money from people who were very poor.

And worst of all, as far as the Jews were concerned, he was working for an occupying power, called the Romans. Rather, like, say, in France in 1940, working for the Nazi so called government there, and taking money off the French people. And he hadn't got any friends. And lastly, third point of the first point, he was short of hope. I imagined there was something stirring, do you not think in Zacchaeus? He'd heard about Jesus going around Palestine, and Israel and Nazareth, and Galilee, and so on. And he'd heard the amazing things that he'd done, and there's something stirring in his life. And he thought, well, above all, what I want is at least to see him. So I'll run along down the street, I'll go up that tree, and at least I would have seen what sort of guy he was as he passed by. Because his life, I imagine was fairly hopeless. He'd got all the money in the bank. But he didn't have any satisfaction in his heart. And so he was a short man, point one, okay, we're done with that.

Point 2. Here we come to the most profound thing in many ways about the whole story is that he was a marked man. He was a marked man. Yes, certainly disliked by the crowd. But far more importantly he was marked by God himself. This takes us into the divine nature of the whole story takes us into the amazing plans and power of the Godhead of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It takes us into the interaction between the divine and the human, which we see here. So it's explained just in wonderfully simple terms. When Jesus reached the spot. He stopped, obviously, he looked up, and he said to him, Zacchaeus come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. So he came down at once, and welcomed him gladly. I want to pause, as I often do, in reading scripture, on particular words, as we go through and say, I want you to notice these words. I want you to notice 'immediately'. I want you to notice that unusual phrase, 'I must stay at your house today'. And that final one I just mentioned 'today'. You see, there was to be this great offer of New Hope, a new life for Zacchaeus but there is something that he must do.

And it's a very physical thing that he had to do bodily. He had to come down out of the tree, go back to his house, wherever that was, nearby, and welcome Jesus into his house because he was going to have a meal with him possibly even stay the night, we're not told about the detail of that. And there's a kind of spiritual parable actually coming down the tree, because I think a lot of people need to come down from 'a' tree, a metaphorical or a spiritual tree in order to make the connection with Jesus, Himself. Maybe someone, not necessary here, but someone outside the church,

needs to come down out of the tree of suspicion about the church and what it is seeking to do about God. Or maybe it's to come down from a tree, which is prevalent today, all around Western society, which is of scientific materialism - we've got an explanation for everything, we'll find it in science, we'll find it in what we know, and that will be enough. And if some people who we know, you know household names in this department, are ever to find Christ, then they have to come down the tree of scientific materialism and say, I'm going to humble myself before you. Or it may be that someone says, 'oh, they need to come down from a tree, which is of their own guilt or shame, that God will never have anything to do with me, he doesn't really know all this going on in my life, and what's been done to me or what I've done to other people.' But Jesus says, principally I've come into the world, exactly. For you. Because I come to seek and to save those people who consider themselves lost. So come down, says Jesus immediately. Now is the moment, it's a kairos moment. And I'm going to come to your house and life's never going to be the same again. And I imagine at some point, maybe even that day, you know how to use an St. John's gospel, he says, 'Jesus only does what his father shows him to do.' You probably know that. And I imagine, maybe in a conversation with his father, at the beginning of the day, he said, Well, look, here, you're gonna go down this street, you're going to see this victory, there's going to be a man out there, his name is Zacchaeus and you're to say to him, 'this is the moment'. And that's why Jesus says 'I must.' The 'must' comes from the Father's will, for this event. Come down immediately.

A number of years ago before I left, I took the eight o'clock service here, which we used to have. And I was taking the service. And normally there were about 10 people. And I noticed that in the front row, there was a man who had never seen before, ever. And what was extraordinary was that he was in the front row. Because no one who rarely or ever comes to church sits in the front row for the first time. And so at the end of the service I said to him, 'we haven't seen you over here before, you know what brought you here?' And he said, 'well, there are a couple of reasons why I'm here today, firstly, is that I've got some cancer and I'm being treated, but that's not the main thing. The main thing is that my son is an alcoholic and his life is currently being destroyed.' I said 'I'm very sorry. Can I come around to your house?' And I went round and I began to explain to him, what he kind of knew, which was, what faith in Christ was about. Well, I think a few weeks later, he had gone to his Portugal home, a second home over there and he wrote me a letter. And he put it in this way. I don't

often get letters from people like that. And he wrote, 'This is the first occasion I was able to confess my sins in a meaningful way.' It was after I had gone to visit him he did it on his own. 'I'm also learning to pray and converse with Jesus, who seems to have given me a greater sense of peace and beginning to feel that he has the future and well being of myself and my loved ones in his hand.' Well, in fact he died. I took his funeral service, but I was able to say, with real confidence, following that letter and those exchanges, that salvation

had also come to his house as well. And that's what it's all about, really. And Zacchaeus was a marked man. Go God had put his finger on him. And he responded.

Now, the last thing I want to say, the third thing is that he was, he became, very soon, a transformed man. And the transformation was in exactly that area of his life where he had been completely weak and indeed corrupt before. That corruption and that weakness for making money had led to the extortion, and no doubt to misery for countless people who had nothing, but had to pay the tax. And then suddenly, we find after Jesus had been into his house, in verse eight, Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'look Lord, now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I've cheated, anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' You know, it's staggering. Such a huge reversal. And I can only think that that moment, of receiving Christ and welcoming Him gladly into his own home, as it were engineered within him a sort of explosion of grace. Which you can't really understand. It reminds me of something that a French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote about his life; he was a great inventor. And he said on one night, on the 23rd, November 1654, I had a life changing experience of God. He revealed himself to me between the hours of 10 and 12.30. I tried to write down this account on a piece of paper expressing it in these terms, joy, joy, joy, tears of joy, and other things besides. Zacchaeus must just have had a sudden release inside of him so that he could go and do this extraordinary thing. I'm sure there was a run on the bank in Jericho. And 'credit Jericho' was going down the tube until the authorities got to know of it! He was transformed.

And Olivia and I, because we read the weekly news that you put out and kindly send through to us on email each week, read it and do you know, we are astonished at your generosity. Your generosity to a family who needed housing in Weston and provided it for them, so they had a place to live securely. Your generosity to Malawi

over so many years now, and again, they've faced another cyclone, and your generosity to them. Your generosity to the ROCK project. And the desire to make this church, this building, fit for purpose for future generations of people who will follow on from us, as well as for ourselves and our families and young ones. Your generosity is great. And the explosion of grace in your own lives, produces that kind of generosity to others, which is not to be found in many other places. I mean, outside the church. So Zacchaeus was transformed. And I imagine that from then on, he did have many friends, not just because he gave money away, but because people liked being in his company. Because he was more than just the chief tax collector and maybe got rid of the job anyhow, and did something completely different. We don't know.

So then, in conclusion, he was a short man; He was a marked man; and he was a transformed man. And I hope that we know the reality of those last two things: that God's hand is upon us that we are marked by him and that we are undergoing that transformation, which is lifelong in our own lives, and in mine. I conclude with some words from Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 and verse 18, which are such a wonderful words, 'we all with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord's glory, and we are being transformed into the image of His Son, from one degree of glory to another.' That is our path. That is our calling, and is what God's grace continues to do in our lives. Amen.