

“Learning to climb trees”, a sermon based on Luke 19:1-10, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Sunday 3 November 2019.

Zaccheus is the best tree climber in the Bible. He found a leafy perch and he made the most of it. Like the rickety stands people built on the roofs of their houses around Eden Park in Auckland, replicated beside racecourses and rugby fields around the country, giving people a free view of games – this in the days before stadiums. Like the people who peered from windows of main street buildings, to watch processions, when soldiers returned from the war or the queen visited or a victorious sports team was celebrated. It wasn't the most dignified solution to Zaccheus's problem but it was enough.

Zaccheus though was a man alone. He was a lackey to the Romans. A chief tax collector and rich. Rich off the backs of the people who were there on the street with him. The Romans taxed oppressively, taking from the hard-working and poor, privileging the rich. Zaccheus epitomised the injustice. So among the people he was an outcast, a fraud. He was resented and despised. They grumbled about him.

Now, Jesus was on the move, passing through, not hanging around, not settling in Jericho, or anywhere, until Jerusalem. If the people were to see him they needed to be quick, to grab the moment. To see him they needed to be taller or push to the front or ... find a perch. There were always people and many got in the way.

Maybe we need to be up a tree. Because Jesus is on the move, now as then. Staying long enough, no longer. Each week we try to see Jesus, to pick him out from the crowd, to wonder where he is, who he is, what he is doing:

- in the hard conversations we sometimes have to have
- In the church meetings we hold
- In our weekly worship
- in the struggles of our workplace
- in the delights and duties of our relationships
- in the personal challenges we face

And someone will always be standing in front of us trying to find their own glimpse of Jesus. And we are too short, too far back. We cannot see over the ones in front of us. Maybe the problem is where we are standing. Maybe the problem is the angle of perception.

Zaccheus ran ahead and climbed a tree. I want to run with Zaccheus. I want to improvise like Zaccheus. I want to keep trying to see Jesus as Zaccheus tried to see Jesus. I want to climb a tree as he did, to see unimpeded, for myself. Because Jesus is always passing through, And we're always too short.

Up a tree not only do we see Jesus, Jesus sees us. In his collection of essays, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S Lewis challenges his readers to see themselves and their neighbours as Jesus sees them. Zaccheus looked down and Jesus looked up. Zaccheus saw that Jesus saw him. That is the connection every one of us needs. That is the encounter from which faith emerges. To see Jesus seeing us, not as a crowd, not alongside others, but on our own perch, from our own perspective. Christian faith emerges from the directness, the immediacy of that look.

And what stops us seeing him is other people. They can tower over us, get in the way, crowd us out, push us back. They may be good people, but they fill the frame. Perhaps our own parents get in the way of us seeing Jesus. Perhaps there are people who so impressed and influenced us, that we have not come to see Jesus ourselves.

Decades ago I was ordained an elder and in those days each elder had their own mini-parish, and it was expected that we would encourage them in their spiritual life. Part of that involved visiting them before Communion. And in those days, when they were visited, the elder gave them a communion card, a token, and when they came to church they put their card in a basket. And their attendance at communion was recorded. When I visited people in my elder's district for the first time, I visited a family that my little book told me had not been to Communion for twelve years. I was young and foolish and after introducing myself said – It appears you have not been to Communion for twelve years. And the person responded – “Is it that long? I had not realised.” And then there was a bit of silence, and I said - have you lost your faith? “What an interesting question”, she said. “I am not sure we ever had faith, but the minister was so helpful during a difficult time in our marriage that we had faith in him. I am not sure we had faith beyond that. I would like you to meet

my husband. Would you come back and we can talk about this.” They hadn’t found their own perch. Faith in the minister or even the church is never enough to sustain faith. I remember going back and we talked together and we had a good time. And I have forgotten what happened after that.

Sometimes the people who get in the way are the people we respect most. But not always.

I went to Sunday School for a few years, then youth group for a little while, but our congregation became consumed with vindictiveness. I was impressionable and open to the possibility of faith, but some of the people were so bitter, so critical that the atmosphere became acrid. They got in the way of me seeing Jesus, so I gave up. I wasn’t mature enough to realise I needed my own perch. Fortunately, God did not give up on me.

What do we need to do? Climb a tree. Go higher. Find a perch where we have an unimpeded view. See Jesus for ourselves. Unless we see for ourselves Jesus seeing us, the people in front of us will have too much power over us. Who knows what it was like for Zaccheus to be seen by Jesus. As he looked into the eyes of Jesus, perhaps he saw himself no longer a Roman lackey, no longer a fraud, no longer judged, no longer just a chief tax collector. Perhaps he saw himself utterly accepted and loved and included.

And then - “Zaccheus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So Zaccheus hurried down and was happy to welcome him.” That mutual seeing led to Jesus staying with Zaccheus, what the Bible calls abiding. Staying with Jesus arises from seeing Jesus see us. And it leads to acting justly. “Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor.”

But it also nearly always leads to grumbling. Jesus is so open, so inviting, so welcoming, so inclusive in the company he keeps, that there will always be people who grumble about who he mixes with. They imagine Jesus only mixes with certain kinds of people or, putting it another way, they imagine that Jesus doesn’t mix with certain kinds of people. Grumbling about the company Jesus keeps is a sign he is present in a congregation. Jesus did not let the grumblers get in the way, and neither need we. He was determined to stay with Zaccheus, and so he did.

I want the boldness of Zaccheus that leads to abiding with Jesus and the people of Jesus. I want the foolishness, the welcome and the readiness of Zaccheus to serve Jesus in my home. I want to hear Jesus say to me - "Today salvation has come to this house ... for the son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." I want to dare to climb a tree and find a perch. We climb up for a glimpse and we come down with a vision of who we are and who we can be and how we can live. Zaccheus got an unobstructed view of Jesus in his life. His perch on the branch became a springboard for a freshly imagined world, for a freshly imagined Zaccheus. And the one who thought he was the host, became the guest of Jesus. We are never the host when Jesus is there – we are always the guest. Alongside all the other Zaccheuses who found their perch.

Let's get good at climbing trees.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

called to be a community following Jesus



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