

A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist, 7.3.10, Thanksgiving Sunday
The Gospel, Luke 19.1-10

ZACCHAEUS

This is not a trivial place. This Cathedral means a great deal to countless people, more than we can either measure or guess. It is good for our humanity, our very souls. There are people who come here regularly who tell me they could not do without it. There are people struggling with great difficulties of one sort or another at home, for whom this is a refuge, a safe place, where they can find rest and strength to go on. There are lonely people, for whom this place provides a much needed companionship. There are a great many who find the beauty of the music here a treasure beyond price, a very great many who time after time are taken out of themselves, onto a higher plane, into another world that belongs to eternity, that is eternity. There are those who do not join us in our services, but come here regularly to pray, to light candles, to stick their prayers on the prayer-board. The other year I met a woman priest from the States, who said she had come specially to Chester to see the statue of the 'Water of Life' statue in the Garth, it meant so much to her. Much more recently the father of Fynn Western-Davey, the young man murdered in this city a few weeks ago, came here wanting to talk to someone who would pray with him and hold him in his grief. And over the years more and more groups and organisations seek us out, wanting to hold a service, concert, or event here, knowing this is not a trivial place, but one where something deep and enduring can be found. On three successive evenings in January a local primary school, not a Church school as it happened, came here to celebrate their 100th anniversary; Hope House Hospices in North Wales came for a large 'Festival of Hope' concert (very Welsh it was, and marvellously so, with the whole audience suddenly turning into a choir at the end, when we were invited to stand and sing the Welsh national anthem in Welsh – I la la'd along, carried on a wave of song); and on the third evening four local choirs and two brass bands crammed the platform for a concert to raise money for Haiti - £6,000 they made. The next day we had our full round of Sunday services.

And without our volunteers, we could not do all this. Our paid staff are stretched to the limit. We have had volunteers here for a very long time, of course, but certainly over the sixteen years I have been here, I have seen the Cathedral get busier and busier and the demands made of us get larger and larger. Every year it becomes more and more the case that we simply could not operate without volunteers. And then there is the question of finance. As you all know, we struggle to pay for all we do here. Without the help, the time and expertise freely given by volunteers, and the money freely given by you, the members of our congregation, we would have to curtail our activities to a level no-one would accept. In some cases, we would simply have to shut up shop. For your work here, for your generous giving, we give great thanks today.

Yet why is this place so important? Because of God, and because of the man who showed us God, Jesus of Nazareth. Because here we enter God's territory, here we catch the echo of God's voice, the scent God leaves behind. Here, in the words of the Welsh poet RS Thomas, we can say to God, 'I find the place where you lay warm.' Here God comes running up the road to embrace us and kiss us on both cheeks; here God comes out of her kitchen, up to her elbows in flour, to put her arms about us and leave the marks of her floury hands upon our backs. Here each of us is called by name; here each of us, like Zacchaeus, is named 'a son, or daughter, of Abraham'.

It is an extraordinary story we heard read in our Gospel, and the harder we look at it, the more extraordinary it becomes. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, towards arrest, torture and death. He has some seventeen more miles to go, miles that will take him winding through the solitude of the desert hills. Jericho is the last place he will visit before he reaches Jerusalem. And he is 'passing through' the town, Luke tells us. But not straight through. He means to stop there. He needs the hospitality of the Jericho people, their shelter, their food and drink. He cannot face the climb through the desert hills without them. He comes trailing a crowd of followers behind him, and a reputation as a most remarkable prophet, storyteller, poet, healer. The leaders of the community must surely welcome him and offer him all he needs. But they don't. Are they afraid of the Roman authorities? The Romans must have their suspicions about Jesus and their fears. This is a Jew who has a significant following, and who attracts people already on the edge of society. As if to prove it, the crowds come out on the streets and move through the town with him. What trouble might he cause when he reaches Jerusalem? If they pay him honour in Jericho, how soon before the legionary soldiers come marching down through the hills to sort them out? No-one steps forward with an invitation; no-one says anything.

Then he reaches a sycamore tree, and stops and looks up. He sees a face looking down at him. He knows his name. How so? The story does not tell us. It is part of its mystery, part of its divine mystery, because does not God know and call us all by name? He sees the face of a man who wishes to see him, who wishes to see who he really is. He sees the face of a man everyone in the crowd despises. This Zacchaeus is Jewish (his name makes that plain), but he is a chief tax collector, with a shabby band of rootless people working under him to collect tolls for the Romans. No doubt they are working for him because they can't find any other sort of work. They were at the bottom of the heap, and aren't far off it now. But Zacchaeus isn't, not in one respect, at least, for Zacchaeus is rich. Yet that means, in the eyes of the good people of Jericho, that he is greedy, with far more than is his fair share, a man who has amassed wealth at others' sore expense. They have bunched their thin shoulders together, to prevent him from seeing this healer-man as he walks his way through their streets.

Zacchaeus has had to climb a tree. In doing that he has shown himself a man without honour. He behaves like a small boy; in climbing that sycamore, he loses all dignity. Truth is he has none to lose, for the people of the town do not allow him any. And Jesus looks up at him, and speaks first, and his words are astonishing: 'Zacchaeus . . . I must stay at your house today.'

No wonder the crowd protests! Jesus is paying Zacchaeus, this most dishonoured man, the most extraordinary honour by inviting himself to stay at his house. Near the end of the story he will call him 'a son of Abraham'. Was it not Abraham who, with Sarah his wife, entertained God unawares beneath the shade of the oaks of Mamre? Yet God stopped to enjoy his hospitality then, because Abraham, not knowing his identity, spontaneously offered it to him – so the wonderful story of Genesis 18 goes. Luke's story is different, for Jesus, the would-be guest, takes the initiative and asks for Zacchaeus' welcome. There is a new vision of God here, a glimpse of God's loneliness and vulnerability, a God who needs our comfort and our help, before he proceeds on his journey to the cross we keep erecting for him.

When Jesus looks up into the branches of the tree, he does not see 'a sinner' as the people call him. He sees Zacchaeus. He sees through the mist of prejudice and hatred that surround him, and sees a good man, who already gives half his possessions to the poor, and who repays any his band of tax collectors have defrauded, giving them four

times as much as they have lost (the Greek of Luke 19.8 has the present tense, not the future: 'I give to the poor', 'I pay back four times as much', not 'I will give . . . I will pay back'). But Jesus sees also a man who is lost, who doesn't belong. And that is why, in the hearing of the crowd, he loudly declares him a true 'son of Abraham', a true and faithful Jew, bearing in his hands for all humanity the promises and the blessings of God.

We are together in this most serious place, you and I, because week by week, Sunday by Sunday, it reminds us that we too have stopped God in his tracks; we too have looked down and seen him looking up at us; each of us he has called by name, and we have heard his voice; he has asked us, as he asks us again here today, in this Eucharist, if he might join us at our table, and sit and eat and drink with us and listen to our singing and take his Sabbath rest beneath our roof. And we didn't know before that God was like that. We didn't know that God took us so seriously. And it was, and still is, quite overwhelming. And that is why we give so freely of ourselves, our money, our time and our skills to this Cathedral church. And that is why we will go on with God through the desert hills of Lent, until we find ourselves with him on the hill of his crucifixion, and then, wonder of wonders, in the garden of his resurrection. And then we will be able to cry, 'Alleluia!'

Trevor Dennis