

Reflections & Prayers for Trinity 19

18 October 2020



Jesus meets Zacchaeus

In our gospel reading today, Zacchaeus, who, like Matthew was one of the chief tax collectors and treated as a social outcast, meets Jesus and his life is changed for ever.

The Rev Canon Dr Tim Bull, St Albans diocesan Director of Ministry, reflects on this reading.

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Readings for this Sunday

These are the readings for this Sunday which you may like to look up in your bibles at home and read.

Isaiah 45.1-7

1 Thess. 1.1-10

Luke 19.1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Reflection from Rev Canon Dr Tim Bull

It's good to be with you again, especially as St John's was the first place I preached – other than the Cathedral – after arriving in St Albans seven years ago.

It made me reflect that getting my current job wasn't at all a straightforward process. In fact, I sent off more than a dozen unsuccessful job applications before finally being appointed to this post last October. During this time, I became quite an expert in completing the Church of England's standard application form, writing letters and answering interview questions. However, on one occasion, a bishop asked me a question I'd never been asked before. He looked across the table at me and said: "Tim. What is it that excites you about God? What is it about God that excites you?"

Excites me? I could immediately think of all things that excited me. I was excited by going to the cinema to see the latest blockbuster movie. I was excited by the prospect of a holiday in some wonder location. And I was even excited at the thought of replacing our old car with a nice new one. The problem was that none of these really had very much to do with *God*. So, I decided to tell the bishop a story – a story that I'd like to share with you today.

The story goes back to the 1980s when I was in my early 20s. On the occasion of this story it was my birthday, so I'd arranged to celebrate with some friends at a nice pub down the country lane where I lived. Well, when the evening came it was as if I'd just stepped into one of Jesus' parables, for all my friends started making excuses.

"There's an amazing visiting speaker at our church, so I'd like to go and hear him. You'll understand if I don't turn up."

"I've had a really hard and busy day, so please forgive me. I'm going to get an early night."

"Oh! Yes! It's your birthday. I completely forgot and I've arranged to do something else."

So, on the evening of my birthday I was left all on my own.

But I decided to go out anyway. And it was a pleasant evening – just turning to night. And living, as I did, in a rural area there was a fantastic clear night’s sky. And as I walked along, there – suddenly – in the skies were two shooting stars blazing their way through the atmosphere. As I watched, it was as if God spoke to me: “Tim, those are for you – from me – on your birthday.”

That told me two reasons to be excited by God.

First, who else but a powerful, mighty God could send those lumps of rock hurtling through space for a billion year – travelling a million, million, million of miles? Who else but God could do that? And who else but a personal, intimate, loving God could send them on my birthday when I was all alone?

Well, despite my story I didn’t get the job. That didn’t worry me; I didn’t much want it anyway. But that question has stayed with me: “What is it about God that excites you?”

I tell that story from time to time, and I’m surprised at the response I often get. People say to me: “I don’t think I’d use the word *excited*. I wouldn’t say I’m *excited* by God.” So, I ask what word they’d use instead, and we end up talking about what they *would* say.

Some people prefer the word: “comforted”. They’re *comforted* by the thought of God’s presence in the difficult times of life. Other people I talk to like the word: “inspired” or the word “moved”. They describe how God has touched their heart or their life. But whatever word they choose, nearly everybody I come across has some word to describe how God affects them personally.

We see this, particularly, in the Gospel stories of people who meet Jesus. Every one of them – for good or ill – finds that an encounter with God in Christ has an effect on them. None of them goes away unmoved, unchanged, indifferent.

I think of the story of the woman who’d been caught in the very act of adultery. There she is cowering before an angry mob – knowing that at any moment one of them will start hurling stones at her – and that they won’t stop until the life’s been battered out of her.

Then suddenly, she finds the throng debating with Jesus. Jesus is calm and quiet – the very epitome of peace. A few words are exchanged. And suddenly the crowd start to disperse, and she finds herself alone with this compelling man. — Set free. Liberated. Forgiven.

I can't imagine she wouldn't have been excited, inspired, touched by God.

Or I think of the fishermen on the lakeshore, mending their nets after a long, hard night's work. It's a very ordinary kind of day, and they're minding their own business.

Then suddenly, this charismatic man – Jesus – approaches and begins talking with them. As they talk, their minds are illuminated, and their hearts set on fire. So, when he says to them “follow me”, they immediately leave their nets – literally walk away from their careers – and follow him.

Surely these men must've been excited, inspired, touched by God.

Then, in today's Gospel reading, we encounter Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a resident of the city of Jericho. Now the city of Jericho – like the rest of the Ancient Near East – is under the control of an occupying military force – the Roman Army. And the Romans have recruited some of the locals to be their henchmen – to do their dirty work – in particular collecting their detested tax. Among these collaborators is Zacchaeus.

Like the rest – *not only* would he have been seen as siding with the enemy – but he'd *also* have been corruptly lining his own pockets at the expense of the poor. Until – that is – the day that Jesus arrives, and he climbs into the tree, thinking that he can watch Jesus go by unnoticed. Except that Jesus looks up and sees him there and calls him down.

I'd love to know what Zacchaeus and Jesus talked about. I think it'd be fascinating to have a record of what Jesus said. But sadly, we don't. What we do know is – that by the end of their conversation – Zacchaeus is a new man. He's completely transformed. He's found – in Jesus – something that's totally turned his life around.

Once again, we discover that an encounter with God in Christ leaves this man excited, inspired – touched and transformed by God.

In the case of Zacchaeus this excitement – this transformation – has a very obvious and tangible effect. Rather than dishonestly seizing and hoarding money, he decides to give away his wealth. There and then he commits to giving away half of all his possessions. And – as if all that wasn't enough – he promises to repay anything he's taken fraudulently – and to do so *four* times over. For Zacchaeus being excited – comforted – moved – touched – and transformed by God led to overflowing generosity.

I've been invited to speak to you, today, on the theme of giving. The hope is, I believe, that by the end of this sermon you'll all commit to giving a bit *more*. And if you *don't*, then – to be honest – I'll have wasted not only my own time, but yours as well. So, this is the bit where I ask you to consider just how generous you are towards the church.

Of course, there are lots of reasons I could give you at this point for being generous in your giving towards the church.

I could talk about the buildings and the church fabric and furnishings. I could remind you how much it costs to keep the church running from week to week. And I could say something about electricity bills and insurance costs.

Alternatively, I could remind you of the need to pay the clergy – to support all the vital projects that the church is involved in.

Another possibility would be to remind you of your duty. The obligation you have as members of the church to support its work. And I could remind you that it's up to you. After all, if you *don't*, then the church may not be here for future generations.

Then – perhaps most importantly at the moment – I could confront you with the brutal effect that the coronavirus has had on church finances – both locally and across the diocese.

But I'm going to do none of those things. Instead, I'm going to remind you of the story of Zacchaeus – and the lessons we learn from him. For the most generosity – and *joyful* – giving comes when we give as a response to all that God has done for us in Christ. It's when we're genuinely excited – comforted – moved – touched – and transformed by God, that we're inspired to give with overflowing generosity.

Actually, we know that from our everyday lives. Excitement makes us part with our money.

When we're excited to see the new blockbuster film – or (because this is Harpenden) – operatic production, then we don't mind splashing out on the cost of tickets.

And when we're energised at the prospect of an amazing holiday in some wonderful part of the world, then we don't begrudge the cost of the airfare.

And again, when we're delighted at the thought of replacing our old car with a brand-new model with all the latest gear and technology, then we're happy to part with large sums of money.

In the same way when we're excited – comforted – moved – touched – and transformed by God, then we're inspired to give with overflowing generosity.

The trouble is – though – that sometimes our giving is actually a bit lame – a bit feeble and pathetic. At least it is compared to the awe-inspiring wonder of God.

After all, think of God the Father. He's the one who's created this amazing universe – from the most microscopic virus – to great oceans, forests, and mountains – to the vastness of intergalactic space. He's the one who's given us life itself. And yet, some of us begrudge giving God more than the cost of tank of fuel.

Or think of Jesus Christ. Here was a man who heals the sick – forgives sinners – discharges debtors – defends the feeble – blesses old and young alike. He's the one who's come to bring real and eternal life, more and better life than we ever dreamed of. And yet, some of us are reluctant to give more than the cost of a coffee and pastry.

We give for many reasons. But the most generous givers are those who've been most excited – comforted – moved – touched – and transformed by God.

So, today I could finish with the question: Will you give more? But that's not really – ultimately – the point. Instead, I'll finishing by asking you what the bishop asked me: What is it about God that excites you?

Prayers

Psalm 127

May the Lord build us a house, and watch over the city.

Unless the Lord builds the house, their labour is in vain who build it. Unless the Lord watches over the city, in vain the guard keeps vigil.

May the Lord build us a house, and watch over the city.

It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; vain, too, to eat the bread of toil, for he gives his beloved sleep.

May the Lord build us a house, and watch over the city.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be forever. Amen.

May the Lord build us a house, and watch over the city.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God, creator of all,
to you be glory and praise for ever.

You founded the earth in the beginning
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

In the fullness of time you made us in your image,
and in these last days you have spoken to us
in your Son Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

As we rejoice in the gift of your presence among us
let the light of your love always shine in our hearts,
your Spirit ever renew our lives and
your praises ever be on our lips.

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Blessed be God for ever.

Reshape us, good Lord, until in generosity, in faith, and in the expectation that the best is yet to come, we are truly Christ-like. Make us passionate followers of Jesus, rather than passive supporters. Make our churches places of radical discipleship and signposts to heaven, then, in us, through us, and - if need be - despite us, let your kingdom come. Amen.

Iona Community

Parish Prayers for the week ahead

In the Anglican cycle of prayer:

Sunday	The Episcopal Church
Monday	Quebec (Canada); Coventry (England); Krishna-Godavari (South India)
Tuesday	Raiwind (Pakistan); Cuba (The Episcopal Church); Kubwa (Nigeria)
Wednesday	Rajasthan (North India); Cueibet (South Sudan)
Thursday	Rayalaseema (South India); Cuernavaca (Mexico); Curitiba (Brazil)
Friday	Recife (Brazil); Cuttack (North India)
Saturday	Rejaf (south Sudan); Cyangugu (Rwanda); Kuching (South East Asia)

In our Diocesan Cycle of Prayer:

Sunday	Parish of Shelton (Diocese of Sharnbrook)
Monday	Parish of Stagsden (Diocese of Sharnbrook)
Tuesday	Parish of Stevington (Diocese of Sharnbrook)
Wednesday	Parish of Swineshead (Diocese of Sharnbrook)
Thursday	Parish of Thurleigh (Diocese of Sharnbrook)
Friday	Parish of Turvey (Diocese of Sharnbrook)
Saturday	Parish of Wilden (Diocese of Sharnbrook)

For the homes and families in:

Sunday	St John's Road, St Michael's Close
Monday	St Paul's Close, Sandhurst Court
Tuesday	Sherwoods Rise, Sibley Avenue
Wednesday	Southdown Road, Stonehurst Court
Thursday	Tarrant Drive, Tiverton Court
Friday	Topstreet Way, The Uplands
Saturday	Vallance Place, Walkers Close

The Sick:

Berkeley, Emily, Amy Smart, Claire, Jo, Sue, Christine Strohm, Hermione, Karen, Sue Holt, Enid Giles, Jo Young, Shambu Mitra and all whose names are entered on our St Luke's Cell Prayer List.

For the recently deceased:

Barry Williams, Michael Squires

On their year's mind:

Rose Dell, Vera Allsopp, Georgina Robinson

[A reminder... of this phone service:](#)

Daily Hope – dial 0800 804 8044 for prayer, reflection, music and worship services from the Church of England. A weekly service is available from 9 am every Sunday.

All Souls Our annual service of remembrance for our departed ones will be held in church at 11.00am on Sunday 1 November. It will be a simple service of music, prayer and readings and an opportunity to light a candle in memory of a loved one. If you have a loved one whose name you would like to be read out at the service, please tell Julie in the office (01582 712776) or one of the ministry team.