

Jesus and the Tax Collector

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Hab 1:1-4, 2:1-4, Ps 119:137-144, 2 Thess 1:1-4,11-12, Luke 19:1-10

Holy God open our minds to know your wisdom, our hearts to embrace your love and our mouths to speak your word. Amen.

Good morning everyone, it is a delight to be with you as we worship God together. Thank you for your warm hospitality.

I am Denise Ferguson and since 21st July I have been an Assistant Bishop for the Diocese of Adelaide.

As this is my first visit I thought I would give you a brief overview of who I am, and a taste of some of the ministry I have been involved with.

Until four months ago, and for the previous five and a half years, I was a parish priest and archdeacon in the Diocese of Brisbane.

My parish was diverse and busy with six centres and nine churches – all active and with diverse worship styles. Everything from 1662 BCP to a Family Friendly prayer and praise service called SHINE.

The parish itself covered an urban, geographic area of 481sq km – most of it in South Moreton Bay. North Stradbroke Island was one of the centres. When I mention North Stradbroke Island most people have a better idea of the area I am talking about.

By now you will probably have guessed that it is only recently that my husband Mark and I moved to Australia.

Yes, we are Kiwi's. I was born, raised and ordained in Aotearoa New Zealand. I am the first born, trained and

ordained NZ woman to be made a bishop.

Prior to full time ministry I was a Finance and Administration manager for the New Zealand Defence Force (Army), which is where I met Mark. We have been married for 38 years, have one daughter, Cara and one granddaughter Bella, who is 15months old. If you attended my consecration you would have heard Bella interject from time to time.

I was ordained Deacon in 1999 and priest in 2000 so I celebrate my 20th anniversary this month.

In New Zealand I served a curacy in a semi-rural multi centred parish, was Vicar in two suburban parishes, Canon of three cathedrals, Archdeacon in two Dioceses, Bishops Ministry Chaplain for Ministry Discernment and a Diocesan Registrar and Manager.

Yes, my ministry experience has been very busy and diverse, but I share this with you not so much to provide a resume of that ministry, but to show you that I know how challenging ministry, and in particular Parish Ministry is in today's environment. I pray that I never lose that understanding and sense of connectedness.

Enough about me for the moment. I am very happy to continue the conversation with you after the service.

Today we have one of the many delightful & transformative stories of Luke's Gospel.

Today's passage follows immediately after the healing of a blind man, and as Jesus is passing through the city of Jericho, to the northeast of Jerusalem, where he will come to the end of his journey.

Even while Jesus face is '*set toward Jerusalem*' today's Gospel reminds us that he is not so preoccupied with his own fate that he cannot take the time to notice others.

The central figure in the passage is Zacchaeus, who, Luke tells us, was a chief tax collector, and as a consequence would have been very wealthy. This is the only reference to a 'Chief Tax collector' in the Bible.

Tax Collectors were not popular in Jesus day.

How often do we hear the Pharisees condemn Jesus for mixing or eating with 'tax collectors & sinners'? They were considered to be the lowest of the low, actively avoided and despised by their fellow-Jews.

Tax Collectors made contracts with the Roman authorities to collect taxes and made sure they acquired what we might call generous "commissions" in the process.

Apart from forcing people to part with their hard-earned money, they were considered to be traitors to their own people by taking their money and giving it to the pagan Roman colonialists occupying their country. We can see how Jesus would cause great offence by sitting down and eating with such people.

Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was in town and he was very curious to see what this itinerant preacher and healer was like.

Remember, this passage follows directly on from the healing of the blind man, and already we have an echo of that story, because Zacchaeus too wants to see.

However, at this stage, it seems to be only a sense of curiosity. He wanted to get a glimpse of this person of whom others were talking about. He may even had heard that this Jesus mixed with people like him – social outcasts.

Zacchaeus, the Gospel tells us, was a short man. He could not see over the large crowd of people surrounding Jesus. So he ran on ahead and climbed into the branches of a Sycamore tree to get a better look.

It could have been any tree that Zacchaeus chose to climb, as long as it enabled him to see what was going on. But he chose a Sycamore, a tree that in Israel symbolized regeneration, and in particular spiritual regeneration or rebirth.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but he did not expect that Jesus would see him. He must have practically fallen out of the tree with surprise when he realised Jesus was looking in his direction.

I wonder what he was thinking when Jesus spoke those life changing words "Zacchaeus, hurry down. I want to stay in your house today."

This is the only time the New Testament recalls Jesus inviting himself into someone's home.

Zacchaeus could hardly believe his ears. He rushed down from the tree and delightedly welcomed Jesus into his house.

Immediately those around began to grumble. "He has gone to a sinner's house as a guest." Of all the people in Jericho, Jesus invites himself to the home of the one person in the town who was regarded as a social and religious outcast.

But, as usual, Jesus sees beyond the public image to the real person. Zacchaeus has experienced the spiritual rebirth – symbolized by climbing the Sycamore tree, he is offering half of his property to the poor and, if he has cheated anyone, he promises to pay them back four times what they lost.

This in itself is significant.

Fourfold restitution was demanded by Jewish law, but only in respect to the theft of a sheep (Exodus 21:37). Whereas Roman law demanded four-fold restitution from all convicted thieves.

While we assume that Zacchaeus' spiritual transformation happened when he encountered Jesus, the original Greek translation is ambiguous and may indicate that Zacchaeus had

already begun the process of restitution.

Therefore, is Jesus seeing beyond the social stereotype of the outcast Tax Collector? If so, he was not going to the house of a sinner but to the home of a good man.

Whatever the interpretation, we can see that, though Zacchaeus may have belonged to a discredited profession, his heart was in the right place, in a place of compassion and justice.

And so Jesus tells Zacchaeus that “salvation”, wholeness and integrity has come to his house. In spite of his despised profession he is “a descendant of Abraham” because his behaviour is totally in harmony with the requirements of the Law, and in fact goes well beyond it.

Jesus reminds us that social status is not a precursor to salvation.

Rather, to be a “descendent of Abraham”, is to be a loving, caring person full of compassion, with a sense of justice, and not just a keeper of ritualistic observances.

Remember I talked about there being echo's of the healing of the blind man in the story of Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus had originally only wanted to have an external glimpse of Jesus. He has now come to see Jesus in a much deeper sense. A seeing that changed his whole life as it did that of the blindman in the preceding story.

Jesus confirms this when he states “The Son of Man has come to search out and save what was lost.”

As we read this story, there are a number of things we could reflect on.

- We too want to see Jesus in the deepest possible sense. Only then can we truly become his disciples.
- Jesus is saying “I must visit your house today.” Are we opening the door and welcoming him?

- Jesus is reminding us to be careful in judging people from their appearance or their social position or their occupation. In fact, reaching out to the least, the last and the lost is at the heart of our calling as Christians.

We live in a world of change and challenge. A world where Christianity was once at the heart of community but now, too often sits at the fringe.

Despite the challenges, this parish has been offering Gospel hospitality to the wider community for 180 years; seeking out and caring for the least, the last and the lost. Listening and learning from the words of Jesus.

I want to thank you for your faithfulness, and encourage you to continue to live out the heart of Jesus' Gospel message: to Love God and Love your neighbours:

May you continue to be a loving, caring compassionate community of faith, with a heart for justice for all. Amen.