

Jesus sees and liberates Zacchaeus

The Jesus-Zacchaeus Story in Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it.² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.⁵ 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."⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."⁸ 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."⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10 NRS)

Jericho is a city of significance in the Biblical narratives and in the present reality in Palestine and Israel. The implications of living there

have been many, this is where surprising things can happen. This is a city at the border, at the lowest point on earth, where the influence of the great powers has been maintained in different ways. The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus is a story about the liberation by God's grace, liberation from powers that bind human beings to do something wrong, something that is destructive or harmful to others, liberation from systems of oppression. It is a story of how love can change any reality. This is for me not a story of a small man, but a story of the high aspirations we should have in our encounter with Jesus Christ. This is one of the great stories of hope, also for today.

The Jesus-Zacchaeus story is important in the Gospel of Luke inasmuch as it contains the principal themes of the message of Christ in the gospel narrative. Though at the heart of the story is the drama of a transition from an old to a new life, Jesus remains the protagonist of the entire narrative. He is at the beginning and at the conclusion of the story. Though it was Zacchaeus who set out to see Jesus, at the end what made the difference was Jesus seeing him. The turning around of Zacchaeus resulted from the encounter with Jesus. **No one truly encounters Jesus and still remains the same person.** The salvific significance of this narrative is emphasized by the fact that this meeting took place as Jesus heads to Jerusalem where he will face arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection.

At the beginning of the story Luke presented Zacchaeus by name. Though Luke does not make anything of it, the name "Zacchaeus" comes from a Hebrew root referring to "pure", "clean", or "innocent". There is a sharp contrast between the name meaning "pure" and the person who is

considered a sinner by the people. However, the encounter with Jesus ended up leaving Zacchaeus clean, pure and renewed.

The evangelist introduced him as a chief tax collector and a rich man. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was at the service of the Romans. He collected taxes for the Romans and probably his wealth was linked to this job (Luke 19:8). On account of his collaboration with the Roman and possibly the extortion that went with it, he was hated by the Jews and was considered impure because the people detested paying taxes to Rome.

His post of work was Jericho which was a prominent place for commerce on account of balsam groves, palms forests and roses. People went through Jericho either to go up to Jerusalem or on their way to the Jordan. Being a chief tax collector in this area would have been prominent and highly lucrative, and little wonder Zacchaeus was known by the people. Jericho was a city where people carry out their normal everyday undertakings, but where also the powers of Mammon were present. It was a city of normal life when compared to Jerusalem with a lot of religious and political powers and activities.

From the story it was clear that Zacchaeus did not know who Jesus was but he craved to see him. We do not know if this desire to see Jesus was out of simple curiosity since he would have heard people speak about this famous Rabbi from Nazareth. Or probably he was not a happy person notwithstanding his wealth and his status. In that case he was seeking to see Jesus convinced that he could find true peace and meaning in life

through him. **Today people seek Jesus for many and for different reasons. For us the question is: why do I seek to know Jesus? Why am I here today listening to this Bible study? Why do I answer a follower of Christ? Maybe because I was simply born into a Christian family or because I know that seeking Jesus will always bring something new into my life. Why do I seek Jesus?**

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus had obstacles on his way to see Jesus: “*on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.*” First, the crowd was huge and being short in stature it would have been difficult for him to penetrate it. Second, his job as a tax collector made the people hate him, so it would have been impossible for him to be in the midst of that crowd. It is highly likely that Zacchaeus lived like an ostracized person among common people. He was not loved. He was not accepted. He may have been a wealthy person but at the same time he lacked true happiness and peace of mind. **Wealth, status and power do not give true happiness and inner peace. These come when one lives in communion with God and in harmony with neighbors. Zacchaeus knew he lacks something essential in his life. He heard about Jesus and was resolute on seeing him. And nothing could stop him.**

Zacchaeus was not discouraged. He was determined to overcome every single obstacle in order to see Jesus. His burning desire recalls the words of St Augustine: “our souls are restless until they find rest in You Lord” (*Confessions, Book 1*). The soul of Zacchaeus was restless and wouldn’t have rest unless he met Jesus. His desire to see Jesus was stronger than whatever was in his way. So he ignored the shame of being ridiculed by

the people and the fear of falling from the sycamore tree in order to see Jesus. **How determined are we when it comes to seeking Jesus? Are there occasions in our lives when we allow the shame of what people will say and our fears to pull us back from going to Jesus?**

“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.’” Jesus looked up, saw Zacchaeus and called on him to come down. “To look up” is usually an act of prayer to God possibly for help. People look up when they pray to God (Psalm 121:1-2; Psalm 123:1). Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus looked up when he communicated to God the Father (John 17:1; 11:41; see Mark 7:34). But in this narrative Jesus looked up towards the man, towards a public sinner - Zacchaeus. To save a sinner, Jesus is always ready to go the extra mile. Jesus looked up to the person considered to be the greatest sinner so as to offer the gift of salvation. As St Paul says: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9). God’s response to the sinner is love. Jesus looked up to see, not a sinner and tax collector but a soul in need of salvation.

It is important to note that there was another group who equally looked at Zacchaeus - the crowd. But they looked at him in a manner different from Jesus. They looked up and saw a sinner, a tax-collector, someone who extorts money from them, a betrayer of his people, a collaborator of the Romans, and a person to be hated. On the contrary Jesus looked up

and saw in Zacchaeus someone in need of God's mercy and love. Jesus distinguishes the sinner from the sin. Jesus condemns the sin but offers salvation to the sinner. This is the meaning of the biblical verse: "... As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). **God wants us to turn from our sinful ways to new life in Jesus Christ Our Lord.**

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus he called him by name. We do not know how Jesus came to know his name. Perhaps Zacchaeus was so famous that even without meeting him, Jesus would have heard his name, or the crowd where shouting and jeering at him and that drew the attention of Jesus. All that the evangelist tells us is that Jesus called him by name. Again, for the crowd he is a sinner, but for Jesus he is "Zacchaeus". In the same way God knows each and every one of us by name (Isaiah 43:1-4). **God does not identify us by our sins but by our names. Each of us is special and precious in the sight of God and there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous ones who do not need to repent (Luke 15:3-7).** This is the true power of liberation, to become ourselves, what God has created us to be.

Jesus did not just ask Zacchaeus to hurry down to meet him. He went further and offered to be his guest. "*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.*" The Greek particle "gar" (for) is often used in the Gospel of Luke to express divine necessity (see Luke 2:49; 4:43;

9:22; 15:32 24:7.26.44 etc.). Jesus was saying that “it is necessary” that he must stay at the house of Zacchaeus, maybe to help the crowd understand the true meaning of his mission: “*For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*” This mission is urgent. And it explains Jesus’ use of the word “today” (*sēmeron*) which carries the tone of immediacy. **Like Zacchaeus, Jesus extends his call to us and demands our response here and now. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Hebrew 4:7).** There is so much hardening of hearts and relations in human lives. These processes of hardening are most dangerous for us as human beings. Therefore, this story of opening the heart, opening the door, opening the life to Jesus, to the true human being and the true God, is the most precious and most powerful liberation.

Let us look at another Greek verb which is translated as “to stay” in this passage. The deeper meaning of this verb comes out when it is rendered as “to remain” or “to abide”. Elsewhere in the Bible the verb “to remain” carries a special connotation of establishing intimate relationship and communion (see John 14:23; 15:4.9). Therefore when Jesus said to Zacchaeus “it is necessary that I abide in your house today,” Jesus was basically demanding an intimate relationship and communion with Zacchaeus. He was saying: Zacchaeus I want to be in communion with you. In this sense the word “house” picks up an ulterior meaning. The “house” is the place of everyday life. It should be the place where we feel at home, in serenity and security. **Like Zacchaeus when Jesus asks to “remain and abide in our house” he is simply requesting to establish an intimate relationship with us in the day to day activities of our life. He is asking us to give**

him a space in the little things of our lives - at home, in the work place, on the streets etc. The evangelist Mark tells us that Jesus called the Twelve in order that “they might be with Him and that they might be sent out” (Mark 3:14-15). To be a Christian is first and foremost, to be in an intimate and abiding communion with Jesus Christ. So that all our relations can be right, be relations of real love. Not love to our money, to ourselves in a negative and bonding way, but love to the other, to life, to God.

Luke presents us with two immediate responses to Jesus’s action. The response of Zacchaeus was as immediate as the request. He hurried down from the tree and welcomed Jesus with joy. But on the other hand the crowd murmured and grumbled that Jesus was making himself a guest of a sinner. Zacchaeus wasted no time and didn’t need to think twice. He took the opportunity that came his way and embraced God’s mercy. He was finally on the way to true happiness. He welcomed Jesus with joy.

Every true conversion produces good fruits. In the narrative, even without being solicited, Zacchaeus stood up and declared his firm resolve: *“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.”* There are several ways to understand Zacchaeus’s “standing up”. This could signify his determination and resolve, but it may also be linked to the idea of resurrection. He stood up. He rose to new life. A new life began at that instant. He began to experience life, joy and happiness which were things that he lacked while he sat at the tax collector’s bench. An unhappy sinner experienced the abundant mercy and love of God and was turned

into a joyful disciple who committed himself to restitution that went far beyond what the law prescribed (see Exodus 22:1. 4.7; Leviticus 6:5; Numbers 5:7). Zacchaeus became a changed person. **No one truly encounters Christ and remains the same. In the same way we are expected to produce fruits that demonstrate that we truly respond to the love of God.**

Jesus wraps up the story by declaring: *“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.”* With this statement he makes it clear that He himself is salvation. In welcoming Jesus, Zacchaeus welcomed salvation, regained his dignity as the child of God and got reintegrated into the community of love.

Jesus the Pilgrim of Justice and Peace

Having gone through the biblical passage I would like to briefly take us through our biblical text again within the context of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. This is a time we are speaking so much about pilgrimage. For us at the World Council of Churches, the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace has become the key through which the fellowship of Churches seeks to make its mission resonate in the face of the challenges of our time. Also this year that marks the 500th anniversary of the events of the Reformation we hear so much about spiritual and physical pilgrimages that help us reflect on the journey our churches have undergone in the course of time and how we can continue our witness to Christ in a better way. Therefore we look at our biblical text from the

context of pilgrimage as a journey of faith that leads us to greater witness and ultimately to that eschatological goal which is salvation.

In the Jesus-Zacchaeus story we see Jesus who is the model pilgrim of justice and peace. He heads to Jerusalem - the pilgrimage city. People go on pilgrimage to encounter God and to reinforce their faith in God. In this story the person who we seek to meet in our pilgrimage is himself on a journey and in so doing he invites us all to join him. The invitation to join the pilgrimage is but an invitation to follow Jesus on his journey. In this narrative Jesus is the protagonist. The story began with him and ended with his words. Jesus is at the center of every pilgrimage. He is at the center of our lives as Christians.

As Jesus journeyed through Jericho he was accompanied by a large crowd. Some of those who followed him were his close disciples, others in the crowd were there to see the miracles he would perform, and perhaps there were others who themselves wanted to be healed of their illnesses. But the people were those like Zacchaeus who just wanted to see who this famous Rabbi from Nazareth was. **In the same way today we are all on pilgrimage of our Christian life with differing understanding of what we seek in Christ but the person who makes the best of the pilgrimage is the one who takes advantage of the opportunity of conversion and salvation presented during this year of the anniversary of the Reformation and in the spirit of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.**

The community that follows Jesus on his journey was an inclusive community. Jesus excluded no one. He offered to be the guest of

Zacchaeus even as the crowd murmured and grumbled. “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10). The mercy and love of God is meant to be experienced by all. This is the central message of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Zacchaeus had everything but lacked love and peace. He lacked the joy of God. In the same the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is meant to help us discover, as well as become, instruments of God’s love and peace. Zacchaeus found peace and joyfully welcomed Jesus (Luke 19:6) but he was also ready to make up for the injustice of the past by rendering justice: *“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.”* (Luke 19:8). **Zacchaeus became a pilgrim in his own life, in his own home, in his own city. He became a pilgrim that was liberated to move, to seek Jesus, to see the liberator, to be seen by him, to be on the way of life, towards real life in communion, in justice and peace. There can be no peace without justice. Our call as followers of Christ is to proclaim the message of justice in order that our world will experience true and lasting peace. And this is the core message of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.**

In the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace we realize the centrality of Christ in our Christian calling. Like Zacchaeus we seek Christ, we joyfully welcome him and we follow him. The important themes of the pilgrimage that we pick up from the Jesus-Zacchaeus story include the abundant and infinite love of God for all persons and the whole of creation, joy, mercy, wealth and poverty, repentance and conversion.

The story of Zacchaeus and Jesus is a story that can open not only the minds and hearts, but open the walls that are erected to divide people of today, walls of suspicion, of hatred, of sin. This story brings hope to us, wherever we are in our closed minds and closed behavior. The story can also bring hope to those who are living in Jericho and near Jericho today, who are divided by occupation and oppression and violence. The encounter of love is possible today, the hearts and the minds can be opened to see the injustice and to make the change that is needed, the real change. The day of liberation, the day of hope can come to anybody, to everybody.

Let us pray, my friends, that the spiritual food received from this Bible study on the story of Jesus seeing Zacchaeus may enrich us on our life's journey. Amen

Some questions for reflection:

Why do I seek to see Jesus?

Do I allow myself to be discouraged on account of shame of what people will say or out of fear of some other thing?

Zacchaeus only wanted to see Jesus but go much more than what he wanted. Do I realize that Jesus is always ready to surprise me?

How do I cultivate an intimate relationship of lasting communion with Jesus in my day to day life?

How do I best witness to Justice and Peace in the world?