For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost

Luke 19:1  Jesus 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This attractive story—especially appealing to children—is found only in Luke’s Gospel. It is given an important place in the journey narrative, at the point where the road heads upwards towards Jerusalem. The matching first reading from Wisdom profiles the related theme of mercy but there are many more links, which the alert reader will notice.

KIND OF WRITING

This is, apparently, a simple anecdote about Jesus. However, it contains a major surprise (Jesus’ dining in the house of a sinner) and a shift in focus (from Zacchaeus seeking Jesus to God seeking the lost through Jesus). Furthermore, as a plot of action, the story centres on a problem: how might the vertically challenged Zacchaeus get to see Jesus? The strategy succeeds beyond expectations: he not only gets to see Jesus but to welcome him into his home. As a plot of character, we witness a story of conversion (metanoia), going well beyond the Old Testament requirements on restitution (see above). Finally, as a plot of knowledge, the objection raised to Jesus’ welcoming a sinner triggers a clear teaching: Jesus came to seek out and save the lost without distinction, going beyond the limits set in all religions by the conspicuously pious.

The very last verse generalises the teaching and shifts the focus of the story. The continually moving “camera angles” of the story are part of the secret of its rich resonance and a good example of Luke the master storyteller. Above the level of story, the words used serve to gather in significant teachings in this Gospel (see the comment below).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Restitution

When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. The thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft. (Exodus 22:1) …or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realise your guilt. (Leviticus 6:5)

The person shall make full restitution for the wrong, adding one fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged. (Numbers 5:7)

Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” (2Samuel 12:5–6)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it

Thought for the day

Change is not an option because nothing remains the same. What is optional is how we respond to change. The Christian project—so apparently static and settled—is actually about the most revolutionary change which we call conversion. Conversion does not mean improving this or that in my life but resetting my whole compass. Jesus’ foundational teaching is the invitation to convert and believe the Good News. For each of us, this is possible only because of our encounter with Jesus himself. Only in the light of that personal encounter does discipleship make sense; only in the light of personal relationship is true conversion of heart possible at all.

Prayer

Father, you call us to live and to change. May we hear the call to conversion, so as to live life abundantly.
at the apostles’ feet. (Acts 4:34–37)

ST PAUL

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:27–29)

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:6–9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Luke has brought forward the story of the blind man (18:35-43), which in Mark takes place as Jesus is leaving Jericho, in order to give a prominent place the Zacchaeus story.

Verse 2 Chief tax collectors paid the Romans in advance and were regarded as especially rapacious because whatever “extra” came in was theirs for the keeping. However, a kind of ambiguity hangs over the story because, while the rich are regularly lambasted (Luke 6:24; 12:16; 14:12; 16:1, 19, 21–22; 18:23, 25; 19:2; 21:1), tax collectors get a fairly good press in Luke’s story (Luke 3:12; 5:27, 29–30; 7:29, 34; 15:1; 18:10–11, 13). For example, the evangelist has just told the story of the publican and the Pharisees (Luke 18:9-14).

Verse 3 The fact that he was “trying to see” links Zacchaeus with the story of the blind man, just told. The “crowd” is beginning to get in the way and this subtly signals their growing disenchantment with Jesus, leading eventually to their siding with those who want to have Jesus done away with. The word for stature is rare, but see Eph 4:11-13, where it signals growth into Christ.

Verse 4 In this culture, an important figure running is always something of a shock (see Luke 15:20). He surmounts cultural shame by climbing the tree.


Verse 7 This is the first of three reactions to the story and it leads to an insight into the ministry of Jesus.

The grumbling is significant. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). In our story, it is not just the Pharisees and the scribes who grumble but “all”, that is, the crowd.

Verse 8 “Stood” and “said” remind us of the Pharisee and the publican. Zacchaeus’ conversion is expressed in two ways. First of all, he simply gives away half his possessions. Luke takes up this theme of possessions (Luke 12:15, 33, 44; 14:33; 19:8; Acts 2:45; 4:32) and the poor (Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3) “Half” is in tension with another sentence in this Gospel: So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions (Luke 14:33). Secondly, he goes way beyond the legal minimum for restitution (see above).

Verse 9 Note the repetition of “today”. Salvation means a range of experiences in Luke, from physical healing to the gift of eternal life and entry into the Kingdom of God. Here, it means Zacchaeus has joined the community of the saved in spite of the protests of the “devout”. Cf. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Abraham is a more important figure for Luke than for either Matthew or Mark (7:1-15), perhaps revealing a link with the Pauline traditions.

Verse 10 Seeking and finding are found strongly in Luke’s chapter 15:4–6, 8–9, 24, 32. The word for lost shifts considerably in meaning across the Gospel (Luke 4:34; 5:37; 6:9; 8:24; 9:24–25; 11:51; 13:3, 5, 33; 15:4, 6, 8–9, 17, 24, 32; 17:27, 29, 33; 19:10, 47; 20:16; 21:18). Because it can mean both lost and destroyed, Jesus himself eventually joins the destroyed and the lost.

POINTERs FOR PRAYER

1. Zacchaeus showed himself open to the call of Jesus, to the surprise of his contemporaries who thought there was no good in tax collectors. Sometimes the people who give us lessons in goodness may be people we previously disregarded. Recall when this happened for you.

2. It was the eagerness of Zacchaeus to see what kind of a man Jesus was that opened him up to conversion. When you consider moments of change in your life what were the interests or desires that prepared you for change?

3. The decision of Jesus to eat in the house of Zacchaeus broke the social norms of his day and scandalised those who saw him. When have you found table fellowship a useful way of breaking down artificial boundaries between people?

PRAYER

Just and merciful God, true Lord of every house, sure delight of every heart, come into our midst today to speak your word and satisfy our hunger.

Enable us to see you clearly, to welcome you with joy and to give justice and mercy a place in our lives.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Ancient sycamore tree in Jericho, said by guides to “the” tree!
We pray for you always, that our God will make you worthy of his calling

2 Thess 1:11 And in this regard we pray for you always, that our God will make you worthy of his calling and fulfil by his power your every desire for goodness and every work of faith, 12 that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thess 2:1 Now regarding the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to be with him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to be easily shaken from your composure or disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

We have gathered to be with him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to be easily shaken from your composure or disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

There is a threefold context for the writing of the letter. Firstly, the Thessalonians have undergone persecutions and sufferings, patiently borne. Secondly, there is confusion and anxiety about the Second Coming. Some Thessalonians seem to think that Jesus has already come and they have missed the parousia. Thirdly, in contrast, there are some who think the end will be really soon and they have given up working. They no longer contribute to the overall good of the community. These areas of concern are fairly clearly recognisable in the epistolary and rhetorical layout of the letter.

RELATED PASSAGES

Finally, pray for us, brothers and sisters, that the Lord's message may spread quickly and be honoured as in fact it was among you, and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. And we are confident about you in the Lord that you are both doing—and will do—what we are commanding. Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love of God and the endurance of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 3:1–5 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 The purpose of the introduction is to get the attention and goodwill of the hearers. When someone is praying for you, continuously, you naturally feel kindly towards that person. At the same time, the prayer is pointed and has a certain edge: that you may be worthy. The implication is that they are not yet, of course. The very foundation of discipleship is God's calling. The second element is that your desire for goodness may be brought to completion by God. This certainly soften the edginess of the first part!

Verse 12 The attention shifts away from the Thessalonians—perhaps too self-consciously aware—to the Lord Jesus. It counts that his name be glorified, because our glory comes from participation in his. All this is a gift and none of it is an achievement of our own.

The careful reader may notice in these two verses extensive use of early Christian vocabulary: calling, desire, work, faith, name, grace.

Verses 1-2 Here we come to the main point of the letter, succinctly and clearly presented. The rest of the letter flows from this thematic statement. The topic is the second coming (parousia) and how to face this unknown event. The “gathering in him” (episkopēō) uses a rare term, differing from the one used on 1 Thessalonians.

Clearly, some have been shaken, perhaps led astray by a letter purporting to be from Paul. It may seem disconcerting that in a letter not by Paul the writer complains about letters not by Paul! But authenticity lies in the teaching and 2 Thessalonians corrects a view circulating with the spurious authority of Paul.

The content of such spurious teaching is that the Day of Lord has really come already and that somehow some of the Thessalonians think they have missed the boat.

POINTER FOR PRAYER

1. We could each reflect on our “desire for goodness” — surely a long journey for us all!
2. Has it been my experience that unwholesome “groups” or movements have shaken my faith? How did I get over it?
3. Does my life cause God’s name to be glorified, building on our daily prayer “hallowed by thy name”?
But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things

Wis 11:22 Because the whole world before you is like a speck that tips the scales, and like a drop of morning dew that falls on the ground.

23 But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent.

24 For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.

25 How would anything have endured if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?

26 You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living.

Verse 22 The writer has in mind Isaiah: Every nation is like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, he takes up the isles like fine dust. (Isaiah 40:15) The morning dew is a very expressing image of fleetingness, vanishing at the first rays of sunlight. And yet, God is merciful to all.

Verse 23 The dialogue with God continues, as the writer now takes up the theme of mercy: God is indeed omnipotent, full of wisdom and justice, but also full of forgiveness and mercy. Here God hopes for the conversion of the sinner. Cf. Ezek 33:11 above.

Verse 24 This verse expresses the core affirmation of the entire section. Already influenced by Platonism, here the writer transcends philosophy, which never did arrive at such truly personal love from creator to the creature.

Verse 25 God’s love for what he has made is not over at creation but he holds everything in being permanently—a kind of ongoing creation. According to Philo, God could no more cease creating than he could cease being God. As the French put it, “c’est dans la fonction”!

Verse 26 This is surely a wonderful verse, affirming again that God loves all he has made.

Verse 21 This gives the reason behind v. 26: God’s spirit is in all that he has made.

Verse 22 This is a summary of all that has been said, and make an inclusion with v.16.

Points for Prayer

1. Today we are even more aware of the magnificence of the cosmos and its unimaginable extent...and yet, the one who made it all loves everyone.

2. How have I been corrected little by little through life’s experiences? What have I learned?

Prayer

Mysterious, creator God, in you we live and move and have our being. Though beyond our minds and our hearts, we dare to call you Abba, Father, for we are all you children and you love us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.
R
EADINGS

In the book of Wisdom, God continually offers those who have gone astray forgiveness and the gift of repentance. Zacchaeus, one of Luke’s beloved disreputable characters, is an excellent, concrete example of God’s outreach to all in need.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 145 (144) matches the reading marvellously. Note, in particular: The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading
Wisdom 11:22-12:2
Who are we before the eyes of the creator? Losing nothing of the sense of God’s “beyond-ness”, we see, in this deep and penetrating reading, just how close God is to us all.

Second reading
2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2
The opening part of this reading is prayer, which we could make our own as we hear it.

Gospel
Luke 19:1-10
Children love this story—and its not just because Zacchaeus is not tall! There is something marvellous about the unnoticed, hidden one coming to the attention of Jesus.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 31 October
Philippians 2:1-4
Conflict (and even competitiveness) is normal in the Christian community but it is not how it should be. Paul makes a very personal appeal to faithful in Philippi to set aside any feelings of superiority.

Luke 14:12-14
Gospel values really offer us a kind of upside-down world. Nowhere is this so clear as in this short gospel passage.

Tuesday 1 November
All Saints (see special notes)

Wednesday 2 November
All Souls
There are many options for the readings today and it would not be practical to attempt a commentary on them all!

First reading
Isaiah 25:6-9
What is going to happen when we die? Isaiah offers us a picture of the hospitality of God towards all when life is over. The banquet will be wonderful and the welcome incomparable—not just because the food will be excellent but more deeply because God will destroy death for ever. This could be just a dream but we know it has already happened in and through the great events that gave us new life in Christ.

Second reading
Romans 5:5-11
Paul reflects on the death of Jesus—and you might notice the pile-up of positive images: we are loved, saved, reconciled, filled with joyful trust in God. One phrase might disturb: the mention of God’s “anger.” The word reflects Jewish apocalyptic. It points to good anger, that is, God’s emotional energy for justice and reconciliation.

Gospel
Matthew 11:25-30
Our reading is in two parts and, most likely, it has been chosen for today on account of the second paragraph. What an invitation! Is anyone excluded?

Thursday 3 November
St Malachy, bishop
Philippians 3:3-8
Paul is dealing with those who wish to retain significant parts of the Jewish law, such as circumcision. In the course of his reply, we learn a great deal about Paul himself.

Friday 4 November
St Charles Borromeo, bishop
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Philippians 4:10-19
Paul is attacking those so-called evangelists who insisted on core Jewish practices, such as circumcision and dietary laws. As he puts it, our homeland—lit. our citizenship (politeuma)—is elsewhere.

Saturday 10 November
St Martin de Porres, religious
Philippians 4:10-19
Paul usually declines financial support but his affection for the Philippians and their obvious attachment to him lead him to accept their generous gift.

Luke 15:1-10
Two short parables are offered today—short but significant. The open verses introducing the parables are a key to their meaning.

Friday 4 November
St Charles Borromeo, bishop

Luke 16:1-8
This Gospel can still shock. It appears that the one fiddling the books fiddles even more and is approved! In reality, however, the stewards was reducing his share of the profit, thus ensuring homes to be welcomed into. At least he is proactive!

Saturday 10 November
St Martin de Porres, religious

Luke 16:1-8
Philippians 4:10-19
Our Gospel passage is about something we all deal with and touch everyday: money. Following on the parable of the unjust steward of yesterday, the opening words of today’s Gospel are surely ironic, tending even to the sarcastic!