

Short Changed

There is always something about tax that makes you feel short changed, you are paid \$100 but you only end up with \$70. I have tried to explain this to my children on a few occasions and they, and I suspect most of us, just don't get it, why don't we just get it, and get all of it.

So it is no surprise that our political leaders usually make promises of tax cuts. The past year has seem something even more remarkable, give aways, a cash splash, pennies from Kevin. But as the opposition reminds us, this is like an overspend on a credit card, at some stage the money will have to be clawed back.

But what if it truly was simply a give away, an admission that we had been diddled and the poor weren't being looked after enough so they gave back some of their own money. Such a move could only be a desperate political gambit, a startling self serving piece of self promotion, surely, a ham fist bit of pork barrelling so they can keep bringing home the bacon.

If it was pure generosity, a desire to give restitution is to speak of the unimaginable, the impossible, perhaps even the miraculous.

Yet this is what happens in our reading when Zacchaeus meets Jesus, the little man makes a big decision and so becomes a short changed man. As we look at this passage we will be presented with Jesus the king, which is a potentially life changing, miracle working encounter, but we may be left wondering who has been short changed.

INTERESTED IN JESUS

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho, an ancient and prosperous city about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem and natural centre of trade centre on the main east west road through Judea.

We are told that he is a tax collector. This has never been the most liked of professions, throughout history I doubt if there have been many parents who have dreamed that their children would grow up to work for the tax department.

But the profession was particularly hated in Judea in Jesus time because not only did they collect tax, they collected it for the Romans, the hated foreign overlords. More than that, the system was ripe for abuse. The Romans subcontracted out the work. People bid for the amount of tax they would pay the Roman, say \$3000. If theirs was the highest, that amount was paid, but the Romans didn't care how much was actually collected. The tax man could collect, \$4000, \$5000, \$10000 as long as the Romans got their cut.

Now Zacchaeus we are told is not only a tax collector but a chief tax collector, to which are added the rather unnecessary words that he was rich. Everyone in Jericho would see the great wealth of his man and know it came from their back pocket.

Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is, he is interested in Jesus. There may be a number of reasons for this. It may be because of the miracles of Jesus or because of his powerful message. It may have been because Jesus has been described as a friend of tax collectors, and tax collectors didn't have many friends. It may have been because of the rumours going around that Jesus was in fact the Christ, the long awaited King.

Luke as he tells this story makes it clear that Jesus is not on a sight seeing tour, he is going up to Jerusalem as the rightful king. Jesus has just been proclaimed by a soon not to be blind man as the Son of David. As Jesus comes claiming to seek and save the lost he is taking on the role of the promised Davidic

King. Jesus is about to tell a story about a man who goes to be crowned king, with little doubt as to who he is speaking about. Jesus then will be welcomed into Jerusalem as King, takes the role of the King at the temple, and will be crucified with "King of the Jews" over his head. Luke could not make it plainer, "read my lips", in Jesus we have God's long awaited King. If Jesus is the king, Zacchaeus wants to see what kind of man this is who claims to be King.

As every Sunday School student knows Zacchaeus can't see Jesus because he is a very little man, and a very little man was he. He would not have wanted to push his way through the crowd. He had been having his bit of the residents of Jericho for many years and they would have welcomed the opportunity to have had a bit of him at last, a kick here, a shove there.

So he gets ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree so that he can see Jesus. His determination to see Jesus is commendable. It would have been quite a shocking sight and not a little humbling for our man Zac. He really wanted to see Jesus.

We need to note that this interest in Jesus is not something that was limited to that time or to that place. For 2000 year there has been no one who has so captivated peoples interest. He is still the subject of serious television documentaries, TV mini series, countless books, and even musicals. Jesus was and is a fascinating figure of history. People remain interested in Jesus.

But as we return to the story of Zacchaeus he is about to discover something far more important. Not only is he interested in Jesus but Jesus is interested in him.

MEETING JESUS

It is perhaps worthwhile trying to imagine the scene. One of my earliest memories is when the Queen and Prince Philip came to Tasmania in the early 1970's. Everyone was out on the street near Franklin Square in the middle of Hobart, and I was there right at the front waving a Union Jack, wondering if one of these royals would speak to me.

Imagine that kind of situation but probably not so organised and with palm leaves rather than Union Jacks. Jesus, the King, is surrounded by a throng, with people watching and suddenly Jesus stops not to talk to one of the assembled crowd but to a tree. When Jesus reached the spot, perhaps noticing other people gazing into the branches and pointing, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5).

The call is quite specific and quite definite. Jesus does not say "Hey you, could I come to your place." But rather Jesus knows who he is speaking to and what is going to happen, no options are given. And we are told that Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus gladly.

Jesus' interest in individuals is something that is very marked in the gospel stories. He is interested in people and if it is true of Jesus then it is true of God.

But Jesus doesn't just meet and greet, he doesn't leave people where he finds them. The previous story in the Gospel of Luke is of Jesus stopping to speak a poor invalid, taking the time to care for him. Jesus, at the end of this passage, speaks of coming to seek and to save the lost. This is why he must come to Zacchaeus' house, it is his mission. He comes to find those who are lost in blindness and poverty, but he also comes to find those who are lost in wealth and corruption. It didn't matter that, as the crowd rather grumpily points out, Zacchaeus is obviously a sinner, Jesus wanted to meet with him.

Wherever we are, whatever situation we find ourselves in, whatever we may have done Jesus is interested in us and has come to save each of us here today, each individual and wants to come to us.

Christianity at its heart is not a system of teaching, it is not a theological system or a series of religious practices, or an ethical code, or moral values. It is

about a person, Jesus. Do you welcome this true King who is interested in you. He has come to seek and save us, have we welcomed him with joy as Zacchaeus did?

CHANGED BY JESUS

It is this welcoming of Jesus which brings the incredible transformation in Zacchaeus, the tax give back policy that we noted in the beginning. He no longer has his hand in other people's back pocket but is handing back money to the poor. To those he has short changed he restores the money four fold, which is far above the amount required in Jewish law. A man who lived for self, for self interest, for material possessions understands now that there is more to life than all that and is so freed to give it away.

In welcoming Jesus the King it becomes obvious to Zacchaeus that if Jesus is the King then this kingdom runs by a different set of rules than those he expected. It is not "he who dies with the most money wins", it is not "do it to others before they do it unto you", it is not "look after number one", but rather a kingdom of love, love for God and love for neighbour and the poor. Zacchaeus doesn't just repent but acts that repentance out in making restoration and so restoring relationships.

Jesus sees that that this is a sign, evidence that the salvation that he freely offered has been freely accepted and acted upon. He does not give his money away so to be saved, but because he realises he is. Like his forefather Abraham he has gladly welcomed a messenger of God and welcomed his message and changed because of it.

The crowd might label him "a sinner" someone who is beyond the pale, a traitor, outside of God's people, but his response to Jesus shows that to be false. He is surely and truly part of the true people of God.

This story is making a fairly clear point, we cannot meet Jesus, we cannot welcome Jesus as King, and not find our lives, our motives, our actions and our priorities radically altered and transformed by love. God in his grace reaches out to us where we are, but will not leave us there.

I have done a number of puns on short changed, but I wonder then if God feels short changed as he looks at us. Being a Christian means that our lives should look different from those around us. Jesus prayed forgiveness for "those who do not know what they do", he must often pray for us who do not do what we know.

We are called to be a welcoming gracious community and so often we have failed, so often I have failed. There is a prayer by William Barclay that is a wonderful reminder of the way we so often fail to be changed by the gospel of God's love.

Forgive us, O Lord
 For everything that has spoiled our home life;
 For the moodiness and irritability
 that has which made us difficult to live with;
 For the insensitivity which made us careless of the feelings of others.
 For selfishness which made life harder for others.

Forgive us O Lord
 For everything that spoiled our witness of Thee;
 That so often men would never have known that we had been with Jesus
 And pledged ourselves to him
 That we have so often denied with our lives that which we said with our lips
 For the difference between our creed and our conduct,
 our profession and our practice

For any example which made it easier for men to criticize Thy church
or for another to sin.

As we listen to this story of a short changed man we should be encouraged
to be transformed, to live up to our profession and not short change God as
welcome him gladly into our lives as King.

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