

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday November 2nd, 2025 (RCL: Pentecost +21, Prop26 , Ord 31 - Year C)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church

Bible passages: Psalm 32:1-7 and Luke 19:1-10

“Welcoming the unwelcome”

I came across a website this week called, “The ten most hated people of 2025” (<https://www.thetoptens.com/people/hated-people-2025/>). I don’t know who they surveyed to get their results, or how accurate it is, but it got me thinking. Who do you think would be on that list? According to that website the number one hated person is Elon Musk. I was a bit surprised about that. Not surprisingly though, were some others who made it to the top ten of hated people: Netanyahu, Trump, Putin...to name a few.

Now if this survey was done in Jewish society at the time of Jesus, I’m pretty sure that at the top of the list, or near the top, would have to be *tax collectors*. It seems that everyone hated them. In our story today about Zacchaeus the tax collector, it is again evident how much he was despised. When Jesus showed care for him, it says that *all* the people there began to grumble (v7). Think about that. *All* the people. Quite possibly that included all the nice people too, maybe even all the followers of Jesus. All the disciples as well.

Imagine if a confidential survey was done of the twelve disciples, asking them to give an honest rating of what they thought about tax collectors, I’m pretty sure even that closest group to Jesus would give tax collectors the big ‘thumbs down’, despite all they’d been taught by their Lord about love, grace and forgiveness!

The story of Zacchaeus is a popular and favourite story, for good reason, given the way the intriguing drama of the story unfolds. It takes place as Jesus is going through Jericho, approaching Jerusalem and very near to the time of his death, and he notices Zacchaeus up the sycamore tree and invites himself to his home. It makes for a great story. But there’s a lot more going on in this story that is of interest and relevance to the writer of Luke.

It’s a story that picks up some of the major themes that have threaded their way right through Luke’s gospel, like Jesus’ mission to ‘seek and save the lost’ (v9). Like the theme of the dangers of wealth, featured more in Luke than any other gospel, keeping in mind that Zacchaeus was undoubtedly rich, being no ordinary tax collector operating from the local tax booth, but a *chief* tax collector (v2) bringing him a lot of wealth. And finally, like the theme of the response of the crowd, common also in Luke (and other gospels), and it’s the response of the crowd that I’d really like us to focus on today. Imagine you were in the crowd that day.

This is a crowd which has totally rejected Zacchaeus it would seem. Normally it’s just the Scribes and Pharisees who grumble about Jesus associating with sinners. But now it’s *everyone*. This is a crowd that physically blocks the short Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus, but more importantly, socially and spiritually blocks his access to Jesus through their attitudes and lack of support and overall rejection. He is ostracised. He is cast out. Even though he is a Jew he is no longer considered to be a real Jew, being one who collects huge taxes for the Romans who were basically their enemies. That’s why it was necessary for Jesus to come to his defence and remind the crowd that “this man too is a son of Abraham” (v9).

This is a crowd that had decisively jumped to a conclusion, right or wrong, about Zacchaeus. He was pre-judged. The crowd instinctively operated on their assumptions about this man. *False* assumptions, most likely.

Have you every made a false assumption about someone? I certainly have. In fact it happened while Sophie and I were away on holiday, just a couple of weeks ago. Part of our trip was a group tour. On the first night of the tour the group gathered together, and we all introduced ourselves. As I heard other's introducing themselves, in a few cases I was secretly thinking to myself, "I don't think I'm going to get on very well with that person". But guess what? When I got to know them a bit more, they turned out to be really nice people! False assumptions can be really harmful and damaging.

It could be the way someone looks, or their behaviour, or their background, or where they live – and we so easily make assumptions about them. On this day in Jericho, people made their assumptions about Zacchaeus. Thus, he was labelled and branded 'a sinner'.

As I researched this passage during the week I learned something new. A number of biblical scholars argue that Zacchaeus was already practicing generosity to the poor before this encounter with Jesus. Apparently, the original Greek language used in verse 8, where Zacchaeus proclaims his desire to be generous, could well mean he is *already* in the habit of generosity. This goes against the more popular interpretation that his generosity resulted solely from his transforming encounter with Jesus. If it's true that he was already generous, it further emphasises the degree to which the crowd had falsely judged and rejected him. So that would make this story less about Zacchaeus' need for transformation and more about the crowd's need for transformation. Transformation in how they welcome those who are unwelcome. That's where the transformation was really needed, it would seem.

Now you may not agree with that alternative interpretation. That's okay. (There are also good arguments supporting the traditional interpretation!) It actually doesn't make a lot of difference to the outcome of the story. Either way, this man is cast out. Either by his own selfish practice and deeds, or by the actions of the crowd and general attitudes of society. Either way, Zacchaeus is 'lost' and it is Jesus who goes against the whole crowd and welcomes him fully and completely as a child of God.

We get a real sense of the joy that this welcome brings to Zacchaeus at the conclusion of the story. The word 'joy' is not used, but it's implied in Jesus words, "Today, salvation has come to this house" (v9).

In our Psalm today (Psalm 32) we also get a feeling of the joy of salvation. It's a Psalm about forgiveness and restoration. It's a Psalm about a Lord who can look past the sin to the real person. Yes, there is acknowledgement of the pain of un-confessed sin ("When I kept silent, my body wasted away..." V3), but there is a declaration of the joy and blessing found in God's grace. As the writer puts it so well in verse 7, "You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance".

They could have been exactly the words of Zacchaeus that day in Jericho.

They can be our words too. We too, are receivers of the same grace, that amazing grace.

But we are called, of course, to be givers of that grace too. This story asks a question of us: “Who are the Zacchaeuses in our lives that need the Lord’s grace - from us. Who’s been left out by the crowd? Who needs to be welcomed?”

With such a joyful outcome in today’s story, it is still pretty sad that no one in the crowd was happy with Zacchaeus or with Jesus welcoming him. Were there not any exceptions? Was there no one willing to say, “Hey Zac, take a front row so you can see better” or to give a cheer for him or a pat on the back when Jesus chooses to go to his home? Who was willing that day to stand out from the crowd and be an ‘exception to the rule’?

I think this is the huge challenge in this story. A challenge to us as followers of Jesus to stand out from the crowd and be an exception. To be different. To not respond or judge in the usual and expected way - the *safe* way. But to respond in the *Jesus* way, which so often went against the trend and against the views of the crowd.

My mind goes to the that statement Jesus made to another crowd on another day, in the sermon on the mount: “You’ve heard it said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:43). It’s the radically alternative way. It’s a way that sets us apart from the crowd when we do that. It sets us apart when we can truly welcome those who have always been made to feel unwelcome for whatever reason.