

Generous Giving ...

... a Change of Mind Occurred

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, on 16th February 2020, in Beverley Minster.

2 Samuel 24:17-25; Luke 19:1-10

So for those of you who may not have been here for the last couple of weeks, we are in the middle of a sermon series on 'generous giving', responding to our generous God. And as I was preparing for this talk, I spent quite a lot of time thinking about Zacchaeus and his metanoia, his complete turnaround of his life after he met Jesus.

And I found myself imagining his version of events for which I need to be a little shorter.

(Wendy leaves the pulpit and moves to the nave and speaks as she imagines Zacchaeus might)

"I've always been vertically challenged. Even at school, I was always the last one picked for the team: Zac the short; shorty; mini-man. They were mean - I mean, people are cruel. So I set out to prove to them - I may be small, but I am powerful. I looked around at all the powerful people and I could see that they were rich. So if I wanted to be powerful, I had to be rich. My goal was set. So I became a tax collector. I mean, nobody likes tax collectors, but nobody liked me anyway. So what difference was it going to make? It was a job with money, and money on the side, if you know what I mean. Just little bits here and there at first. But, as I climbed up the ranks, nobody checked. Nobody asked questions. It was easy. So there I was, chief tax collector: my own home; power; status. No one was mocking me now; no one really wanted anything to do with me. I began to question if this really was what it was all about. And then I heard the rumours. I mean, everyone was talking about him, this man, Jesus, the travelling teacher who was saying and doing the most extraordinary things. I knew I had to see him. But there we go, back to the height thing. I mean, I can't see much except for people's armpits. I would just get lost in that crowd. That's as far as my thinking went, genuinely, until that morning. I'd gone

for a walk and I heard a lot of noise. I normally avoid crowds, afraid of the sneers, the mocking, the spitting. We tax collectors really aren't popular. But this morning was different. I could hear them chanting his name, 'Jesus, Jesus.' And I found myself walking towards the cheers. Nothing could have stopped me. I just knew I had to see him for myself. Again, I wasn't really thinking. I don't climb trees. I never had any friends to teach me how, but somehow or other I found myself scrambling, puffing, panting into the branches of the nearest sycamore tree. My eyes fixed on the man at the centre of the crowd. It was enough just to see him, to sense his presence in the atmosphere, to hear fragments of the words as he spoke to one and then another. But then, he stopped. He stopped and he looked up. And his eyes locked on mine. And I knew that nothing would ever be the same again. There's just something about him. I've never encountered or imagined before.

"And then he spoke, simply gently, and yet with utter authority, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.' I don't remember getting down from that tree, although I've still got the scratches. I don't remember what he said on the way to my house or what we had to eat or drink. Nothing mattered but being with him, the words he said, the utter power and love that emanated from him. Being in his presence was like drinking cold water on a hot and dusty day. It's really hard to put into words exactly what happened, but what he gave me that day was a sense of belonging and peace and belovedness that I'd been unknowingly searching for my whole life. The opinions and words of others no longer mattered. This was a whole new sense of joy and purpose. I couldn't wait to start my life again in a whole new way. I do remember telling Jesus that I'd give half my possessions to the poor and that if I'd defrauded anyone, I would pay them back four times as much - and I did. And I'm still giving money away. And I haven't cheated anyone since. It wasn't hard, I realised with an immense freedom that my need to hoard money, to defraud others, to steal from purse and pot was all about control. It was about protecting my hurt and pain, my loneliness and exclusion. Jesus helped me to see that I didn't need to protect myself. I was loved as myself. And others were free to know and to love me, too. I mean, don't get me wrong, some of the old habits die hard. I'm still a bit of a grumpy old man and I still struggle to be generous sometimes. And yes, I'm still short. My friends tease me with a smile on their faces, reminding me of the person Jesus saw that day and who I really want to be."

(Wendy returns to the pulpit ...)

I imagine if we're honest, we'd all like to be known as generous, free people. But if we're really honest, we all get stuck with the pressures and demands of life, worried about the next bill or the next new pair of school shoes, how far the pension will stretch or what if the car breaks down? It's rattling quite disturbingly. I know I can often worry rather than sit down and take a good, hard look at what I am spending and how things might change.

I know, that I am very happy to empty my loose change into anyone's collecting bucket, but to sit down and seriously think and pray about what I can sacrificially give is a much harder challenge. And I found thinking through the story of Zacchaeus really helpful. It actually left me excited about letting go of some of the control that I think 'I' have over 'my' money. I'm thinking instead about what God's money could do to bring more of his justice, peace and love to people I know, to strangers in need, to places I value, and to charities that shine God's light in the darkest of situations.

Giving financially as well, of course, in many other ways (but that's a different talk) is both a privilege and a joy as well as a sacrifice. I think this is the understanding that King David had in our first reading: he had wealth and privilege and servants galore. And of course, his servant Aruna offered him everything he needed to build the altar, free of charge, in order to make his sacrifice to God: "Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes. All this, O King, Aruna gives to you." But King David insists on paying his servant for his requirements, stating simply the fact that it's not a sacrifice if there's no cost. If we've not considered and intentionally given of ourselves in the process. "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord, my God, that costs me nothing." David exchanged gifts and needs with Araunah, building a relationship with himself and with God.

You see, once we understand the joy that building relationships through giving and receiving from one another brings, and the discipline of trusting God when we have given sacrificially, is hard to put into words, as it was for my imagined Zachaeus. But I know that it's something that people of all faiths share and delight in. And it's a fundamental part of Christian discipleship, following Jesus with our heart, our lives and our wallets.

Now, I'm aware that we have visitors from all over the country this morning, and so I challenge each of you to consider what and where you value, and how you're able to demonstrate that care through financial giving: it might be a charity; a heritage site; an open space; a friend in need; an overseas agency; your local church. There may be others here this morning for whom the starting place might need to be a visit to the Cherry Tree Centre or to the Citizens Advice.

If you yourself are in financial need, debt or addiction, then please, please seek help. You could start by talking to our prayer team during communion this morning and knowing that you don't have to struggle alone. But for most of us, our challenge here at the minster is that this is both our place of worship and a unique heritage site, a Grade 1 listed building, which costs almost half a million pounds a year to keep open and flourishing.

And despite what many people think, we don't get money from a very wealthy Church of England to do this. In fact, we pay them, through the Diocese of York, one hundred forty five thousand pounds each year. That money helps pay for clergy salaries and housing, for the central administration, and also, delightfully, towards keeping open churches in the poorest area of the diocese.

It might be helpful to know what your giving is spent on: I wonder if you knew that 25 pounds you could keep the lights on for an hour; 50 pounds (Janet will like this one) buys tea and coffee for a month; five hundred pounds won't quite buy enough copier paper for a year (sorry, trees); and 1,322 pounds would pay for absolutely everything for one day this year. The choir, the heating, the virgers, the cleaning, the candles, the insurance and even the communion wine, all have a price tag. And all our accounts and expenses are transparent, agreed by the PCC and available for anyone to see at any point by request.

As a church, we practise what we preach and we give away 10 percent of all our planned giving: we support a dozen charities and causes both locally and around the world - and you can find out about them all on our website, under 'Minster Partners' . And giving goes to the DRC, India and the Middle East, as well as to 'Open Doors' - a refugee drop in centre in Hull, and Christian work in schools here in Beverley.

If you are already a regular giver, please find your envelope at the back of church, which invites you to take some time to reconsider your giving prayerfully, and if you might be able to give differently or perhaps to increase your regular gift. If you'd like to become a regular giver, please take an envelope without a name on it and do feel free to chat to myself or any of the clergy or wardens about the many ways to do this, and of course, the most tax effective ways for your situation. Zacchaeus and David found freedom and delight in giving to the Lord. May we do the same?

Amen.

Reading Texts

2 Samuel 24:17-25;

¹⁷ When David saw the angel who was destroying the people, he said to the Lord, "I alone have sinned, and I alone have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house." ¹⁸ That day Gad came to David and said to him, "Go up and erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." ¹⁹ Following Gad's instructions, David went up, as the Lord had commanded. ²⁰ When Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming toward him; and Araunah went out and prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground. ²¹ Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you in order to build an altar to the Lord, so that the plague may be averted from the people." ²² Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him; here are the oxen for the burnt offering, and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood." ²³ All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the Lord your God respond favorably to you." ²⁴ But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. ²⁵ David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being. So the Lord answered his supplication for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

Luke 19:1-10

¹ 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."