

A life changed, corruption challenged

At the beginning of the 19th chapter of Luke's gospel you can find the well-known story of Zaccheus the tax collector. Jesus was on his way through Jericho and Zaccheus wanted to see him. By this time Jesus was well known for his inspiring teaching, and for the many people he had healed miraculously. Is this why Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus on that day?

Zaccheus was a chief tax collector, and he was wealthy - but his gains were ill gotten. Tax collectors are often mentioned in the bible alongside "sinners". The reason for this is that they collected taxes and changed money from the Jewish currency to the Roman one, and back again. In each of their transactions the tax collectors would take for themselves more than their fair share – in reality it was money with menaces. Zaccheus being a chief tax collector would have taken his "rake off" from each of the tax collectors who were answerable to him as well. The whole thing was a racket and ordinary people suffered the consequences of this corruption. It cost them, and they were poorer because this daylight robbery.

Zaccheus was wealthy but his riches cannot have made him happy. In his neighbourhood Zaccheus must have been a deeply unpopular, even a despised man. He was very likely to have been a man who was constantly having to watch his back; either from those he stole from, or from his fellow gang members who may have been vying to take the top spot from him.

What did Zaccheus know about Jesus? Had he heard about some of the people whose lives had been changed for ever by Jesus's authority to forgive and his power to heal? Or was there another reason that Zaccheus was compelled to be where Jesus was passing through that day?

Zaccheus's small stature led him to climb up to the top of a sycamore fig-tree so that he could get a good view of Jesus. On coming to Jericho, Jesus walked right past those seeking healing for themselves or their poorly relatives; and he disappointed anyone who had turned up to hear some excellent teaching. Instead, Jesus went straight to the tree that Zaccheus had climbed, called him down, and told him that he must spend the day with him at his house. Zaccheus was willing and he took Jesus to where he lived.

The conversation that went on between Jesus and Zaccheus in his house on that day is not recorded, but we know that, for Zaccheus it was life changing. I daresay that Jesus told the chief tax collector that he knew everything about him. We can be sure that Jesus showed Zaccheus that his life did not have to be the way it was, that there was a better way. I am certain that Jesus allowed Zaccheus to admit everything that was wrong with his life, and that he was a deeply unhappy. At the end of his encounter with Jesus, Zaccheus stood up and said, "Look Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times that amount."

Jesus' intervention was life changing, not just for Zaccheus, but for the poor, and for the many people he had stolen from. Zaccheus's whole network of corrupt tax collectors may well have collapsed and some of them may even have followed Zaccheus and turned to Jesus themselves.

What did Jesus do on that day? He confronted the evil of corruption and transformed the lives of many people through an encounter with one man. Why did Zaccheus feel compelled to see Jesus that day? I believe it was because Jesus' Father was already at work in his life and he needed him to be on the road where Jesus was passing through so that he could do his marvellous, life changing and life-giving work.

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