

Attractive Because Loved

Reformation Sunday, 29 Oct 2017 Julian Templeton

Luke 19:1-10 Ephesians 2:1-10 *The Message*

All Age Address

Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is initially portrayed in an *unattractive* light. As a chief tax collector, and a collaborator, and a 'sinner', he is shunned. Yet Jesus shows him acceptance by agreeing to accept his hospitality. The result of this acceptance transforms him: his attitude to his wealth, most evidently; but also his attitude to others and, we assume, his attitude towards himself. Jesus says: "Today salvation has come to this house, for this too is a son of Abraham." When Jesus shows Zacchaeus acceptance and love, Zacchaeus becomes an *attractive* person.

Sermon

'We are not loved because we are attractive; we are attractive because we are loved.'

Luther

Q. Is this true, generally speaking? When we consider television, film, advertising, Facebook, Instagram?

Think about the effect of an inordinate emphasis on image and attractiveness upon the sense of self-worth of many young people.

It is worth asking whether the emphasis on superficial attractiveness is the idolatry of our age, or whether, actually, this is a perennial idolatry, but that social media and the ease

of image reproduction have made it much more pervasive and difficult to avoid. An excessive emphasis on superficial attractiveness can play havoc with one's self-esteem.

The Apostle Paul writes:

"...immense in mercy and with an incredible love, [God] embraced us..." Eph. 2:4 *The Message*

Luther, at the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, Thesis 28, stated:

"The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it...the love of God which lives in [people] loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive..."

This insight was part of what contributed to a transformation of Luther's understanding of God. In 1519 Luther was lecturing on biblical books at the University of Wittenberg. When reflecting on the *Letter to the Romans* he was deeply troubled by one particular phrase: 'the justice/righteousness of God' (*Justitia Dei*). He writes:

"I hated this term 'the justice of God', by which I understood the justice with which God is just and punishes sinners...For however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself before God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience...I did not love, nay, rather I hated this just God who punished sinners...I raged in this way with a fierce and disturbed conscience...At last, God being merciful...I began to understand that the

sentence ‘the justice of God is revealed in the gospel’ to be that passive justice with which the merciful God justified us by faith...This straightaway made me feel as though reborn, and as though I had entered through open gates to paradise itself. From then on, the whole face of scripture appeared different. I ran through the scriptures, then, as memory served, and found the same analogy in other words: the Work of God as that which God works in us, the Power of God with which he makes us strong, Wisdom of God with which he makes us wise...”

Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545)

Luther had rediscovered the heart of the gospel message: the good news that God makes us right through what Jesus Christ has done for us. Our acceptance of this is the personal trust called ‘faith’.

“In many ways, faith (*fides*), as Luther understood it, is better translated as “trust”. We are brought into right relationship to God not by trying hard to be religious or pious, nor even by performing acts of goodness and kindness; instead...simply [by] trust[ing] that God is good, and that the righteousness required for salvation is not to be striven for through a life of spiritual effort, but is given to us in Christ.

Likewise, strictly speaking, Luther means that we are justified not by the power or strength of our own faith, nor by anything that we do, or believe, or achieve. We are not justified by any power of our own at all, but instead ‘we are justified by the merits of another’: Jesus Christ.

This is the heart of Luther’s insight: we can never find peace, security, or a sense of worth through our own achievements, however meagre or grand they are. Instead...peace, security, value — take root in us when we stop to listen; to hear God’s

Word that tells us that we are created, loved, forgiven in Christ, quite apart from our own achievements.”

Bishop Graham Tomlin, *Church Times*

Friends, this is one of the liberating rediscoveries of the Reformation, There is a discrepancy between how we appear by worldly standards and who we are in Christ. When judged by worldly standards others may regard us (and perhaps we also regard ourselves) as foolish, weak, insignificant, and unattractive. But *in Christ* God re-values us as beloved, righteous, holy, redeemed and attractive. God gives this new identity to us because he loves us *in Christ*. He gives, or imputes, this gift to us by *grace alone* and we receive it by *faith alone*. We become those who are attractive because they are loved.

In Shakespeare’s play *Twelfth Night* the Head Steward of Lady Olivia’s household, Malvolio, experiences a radical change of self-perception when he thinks that someone else loves and desires him. Maria, the housemistress, composes a love letter in Lady Olivia’s handwriting, and leaves it so Malvolio will find it. The letter convinces Malvolio that Olivia loves him, and leads Malvolio to think that Olivia wishes him to smile, wear yellow stockings and cross garters. In fact, Malvolio is deceived by the forged letter and he suffers grievously as a result.

Rowan Williams comments:

“...do we or don't we laugh at Malvolio? For he is transformed by the delusion that he is desired - and if such transformations, such conversions, were not part of our sexual experience, we should not see any joke. And it's because this is ultimately serious that the joke breaks down. Malvolio is funny, and what makes him funny is also what makes the whole episode

appallingly and irreconcilably hurtful. The man has, after all, ventured a tiny step into vulnerability...”

Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*

Some of us may be able recall from childhood and schooldays when an intermediary sidled up to us and whispered in our ear, “So and so *likes* you.” And if we can recall such an experience may also be able to recall how that made us feel...special, loveable, significant?

Luther's great insight was that God regarded *him* as special, loveable, and significant. And that is part of Luther's gift to the Church Catholic, that is, the whole Church: we are attractive *because* we are loved.

And is this not precisely what happened to Zacchaeus? He may have done well for himself financially as the superintendent of taxes; but did he feel good about himself? Probably not. Jesus's gift to Zacchaeus was the immeasurable gift of acceptance and love. For perhaps the first time in a long time, or perhaps for the first time ever, Zacchaeus is made to feel accepted and loved. And the effect being accepted and loved is dramatic: “Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay him four times over.” And Jesus response is: “Today salvation has come to this house, for this man too is a son of Abraham.”

(Luke 19:8-9)

Lest we misunderstand that loving someone consists solely of being unrelentingly nice and affirmative; Jesus, when responding to the request of the rich young ruler, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life’ Jesus is said to have “...looked at him and *loved* him” and then said: “One thing you lack: go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.”

(Mk 10:21)

The necessary flip side to being people who are attractive because we loved is being honest about the less attractive and less loving aspects of our attitudes and behaviour. And this is why we always include a general confession of sin in our worship. It is the admission that we are at one and same time *justified and sinful*, which is another of Luther's rediscoveries.

Today we give thanks to God for using his servant, Martin Luther, as a catalyst to reform his Church, and to begin a process that is ongoing and still needed, as current revelations about sexual abuse in the Church remind us. We give thanks that Luther's was a theology that could cope with the contradictions in human behaviour, the strange mixture of goodness and foolishness, and of goodwill and malice that comprise the human condition. Luther reminds us that we are judged not on our own merits but on the merits of Christ — which is why, for many, in Luther's day this was *good news*, and still is good news for millions of people today.

The Church is the community of those who believe in the redemptive and transformative power of being loved and appreciated by God. This, in turn, liberates us to love and appreciate one another. And to be a community who really love and appreciate others, who give time to listen and to help others, is, I think, deeply attractive.

We may not be able to compete with the world when it comes to presentation or technology or inducements, but what we can do, and do well, is share the good news: “It is because *God loves you* that you are attractive.”

Thanks be to God.