

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Year C - 30/10/2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4,2:1-4  
Psalm 119:137-144  
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4,11-12  
Luke 19:1-10

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Life is a great deal about contrast, don't you think?? Often, in our conversations, we describe something and the best way to explain it is to compare or contrast it to something else. So, we talk about the weather, and we might say, "oh well, it's a nicer day than yesterday", or "it's warm, but not as warm as it was on Tuesday". Or your football team - "they didn't make the finals... but they did better than last year!!" Or, my favourite, when I ask one of my daughters how they went on a test, the response is invariably "well I got a B, but the average of the class was only a C!!"

It helps us, I think - this contrasting. And so, as I reflected on this week's Gospel passage, I found myself doing exactly the same thing. If you recall, last week we had the wonderful story of the rich young ruler, and how despite his protestations about how good a life he led, Jesus proclaimed that a camel passing through the eye of a needle was more likely to happen than this young ruler gaining eternal life, because he simply could not give up that to which he was so attached.

Well, this week, we see such a stark contrast that I can't help but think that Luke designed it on purpose. Because the hero of this week, Zacchaeus, is so unlike the rich young ruler of last week, and yet he receives the most tremendous promise from Jesus, that salvation has come to his home...

The one, the rich young ruler, is genuinely respectable and religious, honored in the community. His question about inheriting eternal life no doubt reflects a sincere restlessness, a desire for something more in life than his present situation offers.

His problem lies in his attachment to his riches, and, when instructed by Jesus to contribute his money to the poor, he becomes “sad.” Jesus’ response to him is that nothing short of a divine miracle will enable rich people to enter the kingdom of God.

Zacchaeus, then, represents the miracle. Like the ruler, he too is rich and yet clearly unhappy with his lot in life. Dishonored in the community, he takes the initiative in seeking out Jesus, despite the obstacles of a large crowd and his short stature. He is only too happy to welcome Jesus into his house. (The Greek says, “He welcomed him, rejoicing.”) Unlike the ruler, Zacchaeus’s encounter with Jesus enables a distancing of himself from his riches. He gives to the poor and promises restitution to any he may have cheated.

The similarities, but mainly the contrasts between the two characters, are remarkable, particularly regarding the matter of wealth— the idolatry of the one versus the freedom of the other, the sadness of the one versus the joy of the other. According to Jesus, if you recall his words from last week, “what is impossible for mortals is possible for God”. In other words, what explains the difference can only be the powerful action of God.

Indeed, if we look further throughout Luke’s Gospel, this becomes a recurring theme. Luke’s only reason for all extraordinary occurrences, including Mary’s yes to God, including the miracle stories, is that God is at work powerfully in the world, and in people’s lives. Zacchaeus’s response to Jesus illustrates that the miracle can occur, that the wealthy can gain freedom from possessions that possess them, just as the blind come to see, the lame to walk, the demon-possessed to be restored, and the dead to be made alive.

When we look at our own lives, I wonder whether we can point to ways in which God is at work in us, or in the world around us?

We may not feel as though we are either of the rich young ruler or Zacchaeus - perhaps those contrasts are just too far away from where we are. Perhaps you feel that your life is a bit more straightforward, even mundane than that.

But please don't think that because of that you are any less likely to see these signs at work in you. Because as we see, time and time again in the history of God's plan and purposes, God's word comes to those that seem least likely, least prepared, least obvious.

Today reminds us how salvation comes where God is at work. And just in case we need reminding, because we have often been misinformed about this, God is a lot more like a loving parent than a tyrannical monarch, a lot more interested in relationship with us than righteous over us.

Coincidentally, today is Reformation Sunday in some parts of the church. And it really reminded me of one of the main theologians of the Reformation, Martin Luther. Because Luther's great insight into Romans, in fact, is that Paul's phrase "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17) isn't the righteousness God expects from us and by which God judges us, but rather is the righteousness God gives us freely and unconditionally in Christ, so that we -- whether tax collector or teacher, cleric or homemaker -- can hear and believe that salvation has come to us through Christ.

Salvation has come - it is offered freely and widely. Like Zacchaeus, let us take up the invitation issued to us, that we might know God's love, and God's plan and purpose for us...

In the name of God. Amen.