

We've been reading Luke's gospel for quite a while now, and we have a pretty clear idea of what Luke thought about rich people. We've heard stories about rich people who didn't want to give up their wealth, like the young man who wanted to follow Jesus, but not if he had to give away all of his money first.

We've heard parables, like the rich man who was planning to build bigger and better barns to hold all his wealth but died before he could do that, and lost it all. Or the rich man who started to build a tower and ran out of money and looked foolish. We know that Luke thought that wealth had the power to corrupt the soul if it was hoarded and treasured as something to hold onto, rather than something that could do good.

And we also know what Luke thought about tax collectors. They were collaborators who robbed their own people and betrayed their religion, and even when they genuinely felt guilty about it, like the tax collector we met last week, they carried on doing it anyway.

So, when we are introduced to Zacchaeus, and it says "he was a chief tax collector and was rich" we already know where he fits in Luke's world. And he wasn't just an ordinary tax collector either: he was a CHIEF tax collector. He was the boss of a whole team of tax collectors! As far as the Jews were concerned, every tax collector was an outcast – a person that no devout Jew would have anything to do with at all. A chief tax collector had to be double or triple outcast – so far from decent people that there wasn't even a word for it.

The next thing we are told is that "He was trying to see who Jesus was." It doesn't say that he was trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, like you might want to see what somebody you'd only heard about looked like, just out of sheer curiosity. It sounds a little more like he was actually interested in knowing some more about Jesus and his message. He went to all the trouble of going out that day and fighting the crowds, so he must have been more than just vaguely curious.

It would be nice to think that Zacchaeus was looking for something that would bring meaning to his life, and perhaps he was. But he might just as easily have been worried that this new, radical preacher could spark off a revolt against Rome, and that would really upset his world. Whatever his reason, it was important enough for him to make quite an effort.

The next thing we learn is that Zacchaeus was short and couldn't see over the heads of the crowd. That's what we tend to remember about him, especially if we learned about Zacchaeus when we were children, and sang the jaunty little song about how he climbed the tree to see Jesus. It's a great story for children, even if it does oversimplify things a bit.

As adults, however, we know a lot more about what's going on in this story. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man, living under Roman occupation, who had figured out how to make himself

rich at the expense of his own people. And remember, he was not just a tax collector, he was a chief tax collector! He'd already done a lot of climbing before he tackled that sycamore tree!

The people who collected taxes for Rome kept a share of what they collected, as their commission. The more they collected, the more they kept, and they could easily overcharge and keep the extra money. Since both the Jewish people and the Romans just assumed that all tax collectors did that anyway, and they were already outcasts, there was really no incentive to be honest.

So, this little man, who was a pariah to his own people, and distrusted by the Romans, wanted to get a good look at Jesus, and, because he was not very tall, he had to climb a tree so he could look over the crowd. Being short would be a disadvantage, but being an outcast would be a bigger disadvantage. People would deliberately block his way, and push him away, and jostle him.

Climbing the tree was a clever move – nobody was going to push him away from there. It was also a rather humble thing to do. You can't look very elegant and impressive climbing a tree. Can you imagine the Pharisee we met last week demeaning himself by climbing a tree?

Whatever his reason for wanting to get a look at Jesus, Zacchaeus was really determined: determined enough to fight his way through the crowds; determined enough to put up with the abuse he most likely got; determined enough to climb a tree and not care what he looked like.

And his determination paid off. He wanted to see Jesus, and it was probably a terrific shock when Jesus stopped, looked up at him and said "There you are Zacchaeus. Come on down, we're going to your house." But, shocked or not, he didn't hesitate to scramble down and take Jesus to his home.

Now, if you were an actor playing the role of Zacchaeus, you might at this point be asking yourself "What's my motivation?" Zacchaeus could have been feeling triumphant that this important person had picked him out. He could have been sneering at everyone else. But he seemed to respond with gratitude, so perhaps he **was** looking for meaning in his life after all. Whatever he thought he was looking for, he recognized this as an opportunity. He was being offered grace, and he jumped right in with his promise to become a different person.

Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus that nobody else could see. Zacchaeus had taken the first steps: he'd gone into the streets, he'd jostled with the crowd, and he'd climbed the tree. He hadn't quite waved a flag and shouted "Over here! Look at me! Save me!" but near enough.

It was Jesus who did the inviting, but technically Zacchaeus was the host. They would be sitting down and eating together, which upset the crowd. In their culture, you just didn't eat

with people who were not of the same social standing. And, of course, you would never, ever, think of entering the house of an outcast, let alone eating with him. Jesus, again, ignored all the usual social rules. His gift to this despised taxman was also a challenge to everyone else's beliefs and habits.

Above all, he was challenging the notion that grace was no longer available to you if you had made some bad choices in the past. Zacchaeus was searching for something, although he probably didn't know what. His determination came from a need, and when Jesus spoke to him, he climbed down from that tree and started a new life.

The story isn't as simple as the jaunty song about "the wee little man" climbing the tree, but at the same time it's not a complicated one. If you need to get a clearer view of your life and where it is going, you need to get out of the hustle and bustle and find a place where you can see more clearly, and then listen to what God is saying to you. God will be your guest if you are willing to be the host.

The good news on that – especially for those of us with bad knees and sore backs – is that we don't need to climb trees. Sitting quietly in prayer will do it.