

Fourth Sunday after Trinity 2017 (Evensong)

2 Samuel 2: 1 – 10, 3: 1; Luke 18: 31 – 19: 10

The New Testament lesson this evening contains three discrete stories: Jesus' final prophecy of his passion, his death and resurrection; the healing of the blind man near Jericho; and the story of Zacchaeus. So our reflection needs to be on how these three hang together and what message there is for us in how they relate to each other.

The stories are located on a journey: Jesus is heading up to Jerusalem towards the denouement of the drama that is the story of his life. As he enters Jerusalem there will be the Palm Sunday story with donkey and hosannas and all that; and then there will be the events of Holy Week leading up to the crucifixion. And as this journey towards all that progresses there is an increasing sense of carnival.

It's a bit like a snowball effect. A bigger and bigger crowd accumulates around him and expectations mount incrementally with the excitement. You may have noted in the middle of the three stories that, as the blind man calls out to Jesus, he calls him Son of David. That's a bit of a double edged sword, really. Of course Luke, earlier in the gospel, has been at pains to establish that Jesus is a Son of David, that he has the hereditary credentials to be the Messiah. But it's one thing for the narrator, Luke, to be telling that to be saying that for the benefit of the hearers or listeners of his gospel. It's quite another for it to be shouted out within the drama of the narrative.

Group dynamics can quickly turn volatile. We've seen that in Hamburg this week¹. The last thing Jesus needed was someone stoking up the crowd's expectations that he was going to be a clone of David, mounting a military campaign to wrest his kingdom

¹ Sermon delivered after the week when the G20 summit in Hamburg was marked by street violence

from the Romans just the way we heard, in the Old Testament lesson this evening, David fought with Saul over Jerusalem. Jesus needed to manage those expectations, because that's not the sort of king he is: there wasn't going to be a violent assault on Jerusalem; he was going to trundle in on a donkey and walk head-long into getting arrested, tried and crucified.

So the first of the three stories within the New Testament lesson is Jesus taking just his disciples on one side to manage their expectations by making it clear that they're not walking towards glory: they're heading towards ignominy. He's walking towards being mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged and killed. He tells them straight, but he might as well have been whistling in the wind. They just can't see it.

The delicious irony is that, in the next little story, the person who can see it is someone who is blind. The people who are told explicitly can't see it; the person

who is blind can see it. It's the unlikely people who get what sacrifices following Jesus entails, whether they're rich or poor. So in the middle of these three little stories it's a poor beggar; and in the third one it's not just a tax collector, but a chief tax collector at that. Jesus is interested in each alike. He is always interested in anyone who is at the margins.

When we say that, it's easy to conjure up a romanticised image of poor people, who can be patronised by the church, because we believe, rightly as it happens, that Jesus has a bias towards the poor. But it is as easy for rich people to be marginalised as poor people. Just as the beggar was stuck at the side of the road begging for alms, so the chief tax collector was stuck at the side of the road trying to get a view by climbing up a tree. Great wealth can corrupt morals and distort emotional and social functioning. Jesus takes time out for both.

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But when Jesus does so there are enormous consequences which involve equally dramatic changes in lifestyle both for the beggar and the tax collector. The beggar could no longer rely on the security of his routine of sitting at the side of the road. He no longer had the special status of someone whom others would support, however precarious the benefits of that status might be. He had to find a new way of living, a new way of supporting himself. Likewise Zacchaeus had to find a new way of living, sharing his wealth and making restitution to those whom he had wronged and completely altering his business practices.

Zacchaeus was one of the lost whom the Son of Man came to seek out and to save. It was personal to Zacchaeus in the sense that it changed the person he was. But there was nothing privatised or individualistic about it. The story tells us that salvation came to his whole house. And it tells us that the material consequences of him being saved would be benefit the poor people with whom he would share

his possessions and the people whom he had previously defrauded. So his salvation is not only personal, but has domestic, social and economic dimensions, too.

So the thread running through these stories is a warning against the presumption that those on the inside circle of Jesus' followers have any sort of priority of perceptiveness about Jesus. If you want to see Jesus in action, don't look at comfortable people in churches: look to the margins. But it's also a warning that if any of us is sufficiently blessed to encounter Jesus, we'd better be prepared for some radical change to our lifestyle.

Amen.