

## Minor Characters 2: Zacchaeus. Luke 19:1-9. Grenoble 19/1/25. Mike Starkey.

There aren't many people who were alive more than 2,000 years ago that children still sing songs about today. But our Gospel reading today is about one of those rather colourful characters who would have been washed away by the tides of history, if they hadn't met Jesus and ended up in the Bible.

His name is Zacchaeus. I remember when I was young we used to sing a song about Zacchaeus. The main focus of the song was on how small he was: '*Now Zacchaeus was a very little man*', (did anybody else sing that song?). And then, in case you didn't get the message, it carries on: '*A very little man was he*'. I think I'd be a bit depressed if I knew children would still be singing songs about me in two millennia, especially if they were songs that focussed on my physical attributes.

But the story of Zacchaeus is one of those classic stories that people heard as children, and then promptly forgot. But that's a tragedy, because the story of Zacchaeus is a profoundly adult story, about adult choices and motivations. And it's especially relevant at the start of a new year, when we're thinking about New Year's resolutions.

Just a reminder that we're in the middle of a three-part sermon series called Minor Characters. We're taking a closer look at minor characters in the Bible, people who don't really create the big waves. And we're seeing what we can discover about them and learn from them. Last week we looked at somebody called Mephibosheth, who was a minor character in the story of King David. Today we're looking at Zacchaeus.

So what do we know about Zacchaeus? Like, what did he do for a job? Well, in the old versions of the Bible it describes him as 'chief among the publicans'. Which is about as confusing as it could possibly be, especially for those of us who grew up in Britain. I used to picture Zacchaeus as the boss of a chain of pubs. Because that's what a publican is in Britain: somebody who owns and runs a pub.

But originally the old English word publican used to have a different meaning, and this old meaning is what ended up in old Bibles. It comes from a Latin word *publicanus*, which meant a government official, especially a tax collector.

What Zacchaeus did was to collect tolls or taxes on merchandise that moved through Jericho, where he lived. His town was a big centre for trade. And it was a time when the Romans were in charge of the region. And the Romans used to impose tolls on people who transported merchandise through the area. Zacchaeus was almost certainly the man

who had the contract from the Roman government for collecting these tolls, and he probably employed a number of other people to help him collect the tolls.

In other words, he became wealthy, because he worked closely with the Roman invaders, in levying taxes on local tradespeople. And he was a corrupt official, who took more than the Romans demanded, and all the extra went into his own pocket.

Now, you can imagine, that made him unpopular among the other Jewish people of the area. He was basically siding with the enemy, and exploiting his own people, as well as getting rich at their expense. And yes, as the song says, he was definitely short. So you've got to imagine a short, petty criminal type, who flaunts his money. If they made a film about Zacchaeus, he'd be played by Bob Hoskins or Danny DeVito. *'I'm Zacchaeus, pay up, or I'll send the boys round!'*

But then something happens. Something that gives him a fresh start. He meets Jesus. Now, when we read the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus, it reads like an instant conversion. He suddenly becomes a follower of Jesus, and he rethinks his whole lifestyle.

But in fact that's rarely what happens to people. Usually, when people come to faith it's the result of a longer process. A restlessness or dissatisfaction with the way they've been living their lives. A questioning of the values they've been living by, and the way they've been treating other people.

And there's a clue in the story that that's what has happened with Zacchaeus. And the clue is to do with his size. It says in the story that Zacchaeus wanted to get a better view of Jesus, so he ran and climbed a tree, because he couldn't see over the heads of the crowds. And of course, that's where he is when Jesus spots him. Now to us that doesn't sound very significant. But to Zacchaeus and the other people around, Zacchaeus climbing a tree would have been a big deal.

For a man with money and status, it would have been seen as incredibly undignified to start climbing trees at the roadside. Behaving like small children do. Why would Zacchaeus risk his dignity and reputation to get a better view of Jesus? The answer seems to be this. He'd reached a point of desperation in his own life. A dissatisfaction with what he'd become. His attitude towards money and possessions. The way he treated other people.

Materially, he was doing very nicely, thank you very much, but he was starting to realize he'd sacrificed something more important in the process. And that day when Jesus comes to his house and later has a drink with him, something profound happens. We don't know what Jesus says to him. But whatever it is, it comes as the answer to an emptiness and restlessness that Zacchaeus is already aware of in his life.

When the two of them emerge later in the day, something's changed, something is different. Something new has happened, in two areas of Zacchaeus's life. And they both begin with 'm':

**1) His Motivation.** Zacchaeus's life used to be centred on himself. Now he's become a follower of Jesus, and his life is centred on God. His whole motivation has changed. He discovered what wealthy self-centred people throughout the ages have always found: it's a lonely place to end up.

**2) His Money.** This is the real sign that something new has happened in his life. The thing that proves to other people that he's under new ownership. He announces that he's giving away 50% of his wealth to the poor, and that he's going to reimburse everybody he's ever cheated of money, to the tune of 4 times what he took from them.

It's interesting that the gospel-writer Luke puts the story of Zacchaeus where he does, in Chapter 19. Back in Chapter 18, there's an unsettling story about the time Jesus meets a rich young man. Jesus asks this rich man to follow him, but the man says no. This young man couldn't face the thought of giving away any of his money, because his money was what mattered to him most in life.

That's when Jesus says his devastating statement about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to know God. And Jesus's followers are puzzled, especially in a culture where prosperity was often seen as a sign of God's *blessing*. Jesus turns the whole thing around and says the biggest obstacle to faith in God is an attachment to money and things.

And then in the very next chapter, you get the story of Zacchaeus. It's not an accident. It's a mini-drama of exactly what Jesus is talking about. Is it possible for a rich person to know God? Yes, says Jesus, but two things are going to have to change in that person's life:

**1) Their Motivation.** What really matters to them. What they value and make time for.

**2) What they do with their Money.** It's not just about seeing money in a new light, it's more practical than that. It's about generosity, using their money to make the world a better place and help others.

Jesus offers the same challenge to both men. The rich young man in Chapter 18 says *no*. Zacchaeus says *yes*. The rich young man remains unchanged. Zacchaeus becomes a new kind of person, with a whole new attitude and motivation.

We're still near the start of a new year. And I can't think of a better Bible story to help us as we try and think about the lives we're living at the start of 2025. Think about the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus this week. And ask God what difference it might make in your life.