

## ZACCHAEUS AND JESUS

Luke 19:1-10

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

The relationship of Jesus and Zacchaeus is an astonishing thing. It was amazing to those who were there on that day when Jesus came through Jericho. It is still astonishing if we think about it: on almost any count, Zacchaeus is the last person you would expect to want to know Jesus, and the last person you would expect Jesus to make a friend of.

This wasn't because he was a nobody - he wasn't. He was a somebody. It often used to be thought that God has no time for the nobodies, but the Scriptures makes a nonsense of all that: "Not many were high or of noble birth" says St. Paul, "but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are." In the Christian world view does it then follow that if you are of worldly repute, God will have nothing to do with you? Sometimes you might almost think so.

But that idea is turned on its head here. Zacchaeus was an important man - to the Romans, because he got their revenue for them; to the people because they had to pay him, whether they wanted to or not, and to himself, because he decided that he would use his position to gratify himself. In the words of that irritating advertising slogan, he used to say to himself: "Because you're worth it," and then go ahead and make sure he had whatever it was he coveted. And Jesus wanted to be with him. Him, the rich one the dishonest one, the infamous one. It was simply astonishing.

It was astonishing too because Jesus actually saw Zacchaeus. Not many people saw Zacchaeus, not because he was small, but because when they looked at him they saw "Tax-collector" the job, not the person. And in those days tax-man was shorthand for an unpatricotic, treacherous, collaborative, compromising, Roman-loving so-and-so. So when people looked at Zacchaeus, that is what they saw. In this way he was invisible as a person, although people saw him every day: saw him and sought to avoid him.

That sort of invisibility affects us all every day. So often we feel invisible as a person: we might feel invisible to the bank - we are just an account number to them; we might feel invisible to the government - we are just as statistic to them; or it might be that we feel invisible to our employers - just a cog in the machine; we might even feel invisible to the church.

And if we feel invisible at times, who is there out there whom we fail to see? Criminals? The mentally retarded or those with mental or emotional illness? The unemployed? The middle class? - or any class when spoken of as a group. We can be sure that if there are times when we feel invisible, then there are people who are practically speaking unseen by us.

But Jesus doesn't see Zacchaeus as a problem or as a phenomenon: that cheating tax-man. He sees him as a person. He sees him as someone who may not have many physical needs or desires left un-met, but who yet has deeper needs, aspirations, hopes which he has no way of finding fulfilment for. Jesus knows that for many Zacchaeus is the invisible man.

If you know H.G. Wells book titled "*The Invisible Man*" you will know that in the

person of Giffin, his title character, Wells saw clearly that while being invisible might seem to have its advantages - especially if you want to embark on a life of crime - yet in the end the sheer loneliness of the condition can drive a person to dangerous despair.

Wells' story is science fiction, it is about someone who is literally invisible, but how many of us go invisibly through life, unseen for the person we are? And how often do we permit or even compound this invisibility, sinking our individuality into larger groups: church, Rural, Bowling club, Work, anything that allows us to wear a uniform; even family can take us over. But Jesus sees us as people, as persons, as ourselves.

“Not many were wise, were powerful, were of noble birth,” says St. Paul, and that was simply a statement of fact. In this world not many are these things. By definition, most people are ordinary, most of us belong to the rank and file of humanity. The cult of celebrity may be a new phenomenon in our day, but still, it is more aspirational than actual. Most people do not have their twenty minutes of fame, most people do not have their moment in the spot-light. (And this is why the cult of celebrity can become a dangerous thing since we have seen how it can, on occasion, drive people who desire notoriety to do dreadful acts of violence against others, so that they at least will be noticed.)

On Saturday I came away from the General Assembly, met the family and mentioned that Gordon Brown had been addressing us. “*Gordon Brown*” exclaimed Andrew (much in the same tones that you might exclaim “Gordon Bennett!”) “But he is on television *all the time*.” He was terribly impressed that I had been in the same gathering - albeit a large one, as someone famous. Because my children have been affected by the modern cult of celebrity. “Are you a famous minister?” They ask me, and are disappointed and unconvinced when I say no, and that fame is not a curse I should like to carry around. They know that they are not famous themselves, but they would like the reflected glory of being connected to fame. Mind you, their benchmark of fame is always “The Queen!”

Wanting to be connected to fame: was that Zacchaeus' motivation for seeking our Jesus? Aware of his own invisibility, was the growing fame, the growing high-visibility of Jesus the attraction? People are drawn to Jesus for all sorts of reasons, and when they seek him, they are often surprised by what happens next. Zacchaeus certainly was.

The relationship of Jesus and Zacchaeus is astonishing too because the invisible man is visible to Jesus. Jesus notices him, just as always he notices both the self-important and the nonentities. And now Zacchaeus was in for a shock. Jesus didn't just notice him, he saw him. Jesus is not afflicted with the kind of blindness which sees a person as part of a group, as a role rather than an individual. And Jesus knows all about Zacchaeus. Despite that Zacchaeus is acceptable to Jesus, even though everyone knows he is evil. And everyone is right. Most of us try to hide what we know to be wrong about ourselves, but everyone knew it for Zacchaeus - or they thought they did. They certainly knew some of what was all wrong about his life-style. But was his tax-gathering his real sin? No, it was his cheating, at bottom his selfishness, which had truly cut him off from everyone else, made him invisible, fed and grown his loneliness.

To Jesus we are not invisible and we are acceptable, not because we are respectable, even if we can fool others, but because we know we're not. We are acceptable to Jesus because, like Zacchaeus, we are lonely, sinful, broken people. No

doubt Zacchaeus tried to bolster himself up, convince himself that he wasn't as empty and lonely as he really was: each time he took more than his due, each time he played to his sense of self-importance. Bolstering ourselves up is one way to avoid looking at the reality of our lives and ourselves. The other defence is to put ourselves down, as Isaiah did when he was called by God to take his message to the people. "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips" he cries. The newly anointed King- Saul suffered from the same temptation to put himself down. He had been anointed by Samuel, privately, but when the public choosing of the king was taking place he hid, so that when the lot fell, as Samuel and Saul knew it would, for him, they had to go and find him hiding among the baggage.

Whether we hid in bolstering ourselves up or putting ourselves down, when we come to Jesus when he comes to us, we find that he wants to give us a true sense of ourselves. He looks up at us, hiding in our trees, in our clubs, in our families, in our assumed identities, and he says "I choose to come to your house, I choose you."