

Sermon for Sunday 8 October 2023 – Harvest Festival

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Deuteronomy 16.13-15; Luke 19.1-10

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our first Bible reading today describes an Old Testament harvest celebration, and it describes the Festival of Booths, when the people of God, the people of Israel, gathered to give thanks to God for all the fruits of creation, for the blessings of all their hard work - there'll be food for another year. And the image presented for us is of all the people gathered together in one place, celebrating together, and with a sense that the Lord God is in their midst because they're in a place that the Lord God has chosen.

We had our Harvest Supper here on Friday night; it was a great sense of occasion. We were all gathered as a community, sharing food together, and that binds us together, and we were here in the Lord's house, the Lord present in the midst of our celebration. So the Bible reading we heard reminded me of what seemed to connect with our Harvest Supper. And it also connects with what Jesus said about 'Love the Lord your God, with all your heart and all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.' So everybody gathered together in one place, giving thanks to God for the fruits of the harvest, for the blessing of life, and enjoying being a community together in that place. So that's the first reading.

You might say to yourself, what's the second reading got to do with Harvest Festival, the story of Zacchaeus? Well, I think it's got everything to do with Harvest Festival. So I need a volunteer... Graham, right. So here we are. You can come and sit on here for me. [*Graham takes a seat centrally*]. No, it's not the stocks, you're alright.

So Zacchaeus; Zacchaeus was a member of the people of God, child of Abraham, an Israelite, somebody who belongs to the community of Israel. But something had gone wrong. So Zacchaeus, we're told, was a tax collector. Nothing wrong with tax collectors; do we have any tax collectors in this morning? No? Okay. Well, there's nothing wrong with working for His Majesty's Inland Revenue, is there? We don't mind paying our taxes. We get all kinds of blessings for our taxes, like high speed railways, and think, oh, no, we didn't get that. But we pay our taxes for good reasons, don't we?

Anyway, but for being a Roman tax collector, that was a bit different. I mean, what have the Romans ever done for us? Anyway, what have the Romans ever done? What do you get for taxes from the Romans? You don't get much. What you get is an army of occupation. So Zacchaeus was collecting taxes to pay for a Roman army of occupation. And the way it worked was that you said to the Romans, I'll raise this amount of money, let's say a million pounds a year, to pay for this army. And they would say, okay, that's fine. Anything left over, you can keep for yourself. So Zacchaeus probably employed a number of customer service agents, shall we say, who would help him to make as much money as possible out of

the taxes that he would collect. And you can imagine that not everybody was very keen to pay those taxes for an army of occupation.

So Zacchaeus's employment has separated him straight away from his belonging to that community, the people of God. *[Simon stacks some boxes in front of Graham]*. So Pink Floyd sang about another brick in the wall, didn't they? So the taxes that he collected began to be a barrier between Zacchaeus and the people to whom he belonged and the God to whom he belonged. So as you become isolated, you accumulate more and more. And the more he accumulated, the more he became isolated. And the more he became isolated, the more he was separated from his people and from God. *[Simon stacks more boxes in front of Graham, so he is invisible to the congregation]*. This sermon is brought to you by Britannia Removals, who will happily take your relatives as far away as you wish them to go.

So much *[stacks more boxes]* so that there was a barrier, a barrier of greed and possessions and isolation. Because through his employment, Zacchaeus is now separated from his people and from his God. And he can't see beyond that job of accumulating more and more, and more and more. And then, of course, one day, he hears that Jesus is coming to town. Can you nip up to the pulpit for us? *[Graham steps up into the pulpit]*.

And we read in the story that Zacchaeus is a very little man, isn't he? He can't see over the crowd, he can't see Jesus coming. So the people don't love him, they don't welcome him. All these taxes have created this barrier. It's the very opposite of love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself. And it's interesting that there's a sycamore tree, wasn't there, that Zacchaeus climbed? There's a sycamore tree been in the news this week, hasn't there? A sycamore tree by a Roman wall that was felled? So it's funny how these stories keep coming round and repeating themselves, isn't it? And the one that was spelled in Northumberland was maybe a symbol of anger and selfishness and division. Somehow, somebody up there was angry because they felt separated from community, didn't they? They felt separated from God. Something has gone wrong. The same story.

So Jesus comes and he invites Zacchaeus to come down. I'm going to come to your house today. *[Graham steps down]*. And in so doing, the wall is demolished. *[The boxes are removed]*. And what we have is the agency, the action of Christ Jesus, the action of God Himself, who breaks down all that divides us from each other, all that divides us from the God who loves us and restores to us that sense of belonging in a place that God will choose, where you will be the people of God together; where you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself.

And, of course, what Zacchaeus's neighbours had to learn was to forgive him. Why is Jesus eating in a house of a sinner? They had to learn to forgive and to accept. And the response of Zacchaeus to the grace and the mercy of God is to give back everything he's stolen and more still, because his life is transformed by that restoration of his place in the community of God. So on our harvest festival, we remind ourselves of that place that we all have in the community of Christ Jesus, our belonging together, not as individuals, but as one family before God, called together to be one in his name, in this place; and

in our harvest goods, we live out that responsibility to care, to share, to give thanks and to give back generously because of all that the Lord has given to us.

So love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself. Thank you, Graham. And just to conclude the story, last week's collect seems to sum it up; Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. Pour your love into our hearts and draw us yourself; and so bring us at the last to your heavenly city, where we shall see you face to face. Amen.