

Treasure Sunday

'Zaccheus, an example of generosity – really!'

Sermon by Mark Pilgrim

Stories of people doing amazingly generous things with money may not be that frequent but can be encouraging to hear. To know that Bill Gates, once the richest person in the world, is dedicating his super-wealth from Microsoft to eradicating malaria is heartening. Also intriguing is the decision by Warren Buffet, once Bill Gate's No 2 as the richest person in the world, to commit his wealth to the same cause – on the basis that, if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing thoroughly. Huge strides have been made in combatting malaria and enabling children in malaria affected parts of the world not be laid low by illness but spend more time in school. It has to be said though, that after twenty years of this dedicated fight, the battle isn't over. The malaria-bearing mosquitoes keep developing immunity to measures taken against them and more resources – and greater stability – needs to come to malaria affected countries before the goal gets to be achieved. Nevertheless, without these acts of selfless generosity, the world would be a lot worse off than it is now. Thank you, Bill and Melinda Gates: thank you, Warren Buffet.

Seeing money as a means to do good...giving money to good causes that enable the world to be a better place is something we can all agree is a good thing and that we should all aspire to. It's just that it seems to be easier to do when you earn so much money, you literally can't think what to do with it all. Comparatively few people in the world are in this position and I doubt whether any of us here feel that – barring winning the Euro millions lottery that we don't go in for anyway – we will ever get close to being in such a position ourselves.

How close a connection, I wonder, do we feel we have with the wealthy person at the centre of today's Gospel? Anybody here who recognises that they are 'short of stature' may be glad that, wealth or no wealth, a 'height-challenged' person is the focus of Jesus' attention. But there is another way, I suggest, that many, if not all, of us could be said to have a connection with Zacchaeus which I have only just begun to appreciate.

How many of us think that Zacchaeus' moment of conversion, the moment when he vowed to take a radically different approach to his wealth came when Jesus saw Zacchaeus and, breaking all the rules of etiquette and tradition, invited himself to dine with this major sinner and hated collaborator with the Romans?

In fact, it could be that Zacchaeus' relationship with money was much more complicated than being an extortioner who, on encountering Jesus, saw the light and only then joined the good guys. Recent biblical experts point out that the translation of Zacchaeus' words in our reading from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is wrong. Rather than say 'half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much' (i.e. locate the giving in the future) actually the Greek verbs are in the present not the future tense. So, the commentaries point out, Zacchaeus says 'half of my possessions, Lord, I am giving to the poor...if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I am paying four times as much.' The implication of this, I suggest, is that Zacchaeus is much more like us than we might like to admit.

Could it be that Zacchaeus is taking with one hand and giving with the other at the same time? Could it be that he is both a tax collector and a generous supporter of charity and people in need? Could it be that, like tax evaders of our own time who also give to charities, Zacchaeus was sinning and being righteous at the same time? Could it be that, in fact, we gathered here at St Peter's and Zacchaeus are in remarkably similar positions – all of us, in some way, both exploiters of other people and virtuous and generous with some others at the same time?

What happens when Jesus identifies Zacchaeus' desire to satisfy his curiosity and relate positively to the things of God? God in Christ celebrates the move, announcing 'Today salvation has come to this house'. What we can note is that Jesus' promise of salvation to Zacchaeus is not a reward for saying he will be generous where previously he has been mean. With Zaccheus' generosity being understood as current and settled practice, Jesus' promise of salvation comes not as reward but purely – and we shouldn't be surprised at this – as a gift of God's grace. God's grace, God's salvation, God's wholeness is offered not as a reward for good behaviour but simply and always as a gift to broken people who see themselves in relationship with God. As Sarah reminded us two weeks ago on All Saints Sunday, Paul describes any and everyone who believes Jesus is the Son of God as a 'saint' – and saints can only be saints when – named Zaccheus, Tom, Dick or Harry - they know they are also sinners.

So what does this mean for us on Treasure Sunday?

It means we should keep on coming to God just as Zacchaeus did – warts and all, as we truly are, ready, however, to experience two things: deeper relationship with God and our further movement towards that generous, sacrificial pattern of life we see in Christ.

In God's good grace, what St Peter's is currently doing could be said to be helping us move in these directions already. St Peter's attenders developing a deeper relationship with God should be an outcome of the Worship course which many have recently embarked on. And inhabiting further the generous, sacrificial patterns of Christ is what we are concentrating on today - Treasure Sunday.

Just in case it isn't crystal clear to everyone, the Church of England is a voluntary institution. It is not financed by the state or government. Yes, it has historic investments that yield large sums of money in rent and share income. But the costs of maintaining and developing the national church, its leaders, government and specialist staff and investing in and training its authorised ministers, lay and ordained, eats most of this up. Basically Dioceses have to pay for their own staff costs – and the income to do this comes from all of us in the pews and – here at St Peter's – the comfortable upholstered seats!

Because of the distribution of wealth around the Diocese, wealthier parishes like ours in North Bristol are invited to provide more than parishes in the most economically challenged parts of the city. Just to give you some information about this: our community is in the top 10% least deprived areas of the country. Parts of Bristol to the north and south of us are in the 10% most deprived areas of the country. So the need and potential for us to share our relative riches as Christians is huge.

One other very positive area to focus on is the encouragement and training of new clergy. Because so many clergy are currently or soon retiring, a target was established 5 years ago to increase the numbers of people being ordained by 50% between 2016 and 2020. You may already know – but, if not, I am delighted to tell you, Bristol Diocese is being successful in meeting this challenge and is increasing its number of candidates for ordination by 50%. But an increase of 50% in numbers means a 50% increase in training bills. When preparing people for their new roles takes two or three years, quite a lot more income is needed to provide 50% more training! But – as we know from the wonderful ordinands who come on placement here...it's worth it!

Our Parish Treasurer has worked out that meeting our current commitments and future targets will be done when our income goes up, on average, by £1.73 per giver per week or by £7.50 per giver per month. So that's the clarion call. Zaccheus said he gave half his income away: when reviewing our finances, can we respond to God's good and gracious provision of what we take to be our own but which, in the eyes of faith, we hold on trust from God. Is it possible to increase our giving by what, for many people, would be less than a cup of

coffee on Henleaze Road per week: £1.73? If yes – great. If no: please don't worry. Everybody's circumstances differ – and some people's circumstances will be tighter this year than they were last.

Giving generously and sacrificially after the example of Jesus is given important expression through money. But that isn't the only way we are invited to do this today. Everyone is invited to take a look at the '50 Ways to give and serve through St Peter's' documents available in the church and hall. Through them everyone can get an idea of the wide range of ways people at St Peter's are giving their time and talents to contribute to the building of God's kingdom. Please have a look through them. Ask questions about any you want to know more about. Contact people or sign up for those you would like to be part of.

This Treasure Sunday is, in a narrow sense, an opportunity to inform and encourage everyone about giving time, talents and treasure through St Peter's. This Treasure Sunday is, at its broadest, an opportunity to walk in the footsteps of Zacchaeus and all the flawed disciples, past and present, who, despite their sin and waywardness, Christ includes in the ambit of God's love and grace.

May we see ourselves similarly included – and respond to his sacrificial giving with sacrificial giving ourselves. Amen.