

## High Street Uniting Church Luke 19:1 - 10

### A saint in Jericho

When addressing the various church communities that he was writing to, Paul would almost always call them saints or that they were called to be saints. This must have been a little confusing to people in those communities. The word saint in Greek meant set apart or holy - *hagios* - just like that grand church in ancient Constantinople, the Hagia Sophia. And some of the readers of those letters may have thought, “Scripture says be holy as your Father in heaven is holy”, and that leads to all those thoughts about saints being special people, set apart, and extra spiritual, and unsullied by the world. Much



like what some parts of the Christian church today think a saint is. However, Paul was an apostle of Jesus, the Jesus who had come to the world, indeed who had come to him, to demonstrate a completely different definition of what ‘be holy as your Father in heaven is holy’ means. Being holy is not about separating yourself from the world, it means get involved in the world and spread the love and grace of God. Turn away from yourself to show the mercy and compassion of God to the world around you. You can almost hear Paul saying, “You want to know what I mean by saint? Hear the stories of Jesus and see the lives changed from being about themselves to following the will of God just by encountering

Jesus, the Son of God. Talk to my friend Luke, he’s collecting stories of Jesus, ask him about people like Zacchaeus”.

Have you ever wondered why some characters in scripture get a name and some don’t? Why is that we have a woman with a haemorrhage or the leader of the synagogue or a centurion on one hand and Nicodemus and Mary and Martha and Zacchaeus on the other? I think, and there is support in scholarly sources for this, that characters are named in stories because they had become known in the communities that held and treasured those stories. And I think Zacchaeus is named in this story of the effect that Jesus had on people’s lives because after his dramatic and life changing encounter with Jesus he went on to become not just a known character in the Jericho Jesus community but indeed, the host of the house church in Jericho. There are a couple of little clues in the language of the story that point to this as an important message in this story. Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he must remain in Zacchaeus’ house, and then he goes on to say that salvation has come to this house today.

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the theological concepts of God’s presence on earth and the proper way to worship are all thrown into turmoil, and with the followers of Jesus being rejected by synagogues, the house becomes the centre of Christian worship. That is one reason why there are so many stories in the Gospels set in houses. No longer is there a house of God in Jerusalem, now we have the many houses of God and Christ throughout the Mediterranean area. So, when Jesus says to Zacchaeus, “I must remain in your house”, with the concept of the house church in mind, this is not just about pausing to have lunch on the way to Jerusalem, but a subtle nod in the story to Zacchaeus’ house becoming the place of encountering Jesus in worship and fellowship

as he remains in the house. And, as encountering Jesus is the way of salvation, there is a double meaning to Jesus statement that salvation has come to this house. The Zacchaeus story has ripples, not just for the people who get their money back from him, and all that meant for justice and compassion in Jericho, but in the ongoing presence of a faith community in Zacchaeus' house.

While Zacchaeus is a good example, leaving our focus there runs that same risk of lifting him up as a special person, and example of sainthood. Talking about leading a house church can take away the actual power of this story - the dramatic change in a person from an encounter with Jesus. This is a great story about how much a person can change, not just in themselves and their behaviour, but in the eyes of others. The tree - which is a wonderful element of the story for storytellers and for Sunday School classes - is also a symbol of the community's impression of Zacchaeus. He is short, but he is also so disliked that there is no way he can get through to the front of the crowd. It's not just his drive to see this man he had heard so much about that sends him up the tree. His reputation in Jericho sends him up that tree. And yet his change of character and behaviour makes him a known person in the early church - that's a dramatic change and an example of what an encounter with Jesus can bring to a life.

Saints are not just the special, extra spiritual people, but they are also not just those who have made an intellectual assent to a set of religious concepts. Saints are those who have allowed their encounter with God in Jesus Christ to affect their lives; to make changes in character and priorities and to live as the people of God. Zacchaeus is a fine example, as are Martha and Mary and Lazarus and Nicodemus because otherwise the only named characters are the apostles and that might lead us back to the idea that saints are all special people. But the unnamed characters are also important to remind us of all the unknown saints throughout the history of the church who had an effect on someone's life, who had an influence on someone's faith because they let their encounter with Jesus change their life.

Paul was right when he addressed his letters, every church community has saints, known and unknown, and we are all called to be saints, to reflect the example of people like Zacchaeus, people who see something special in Jesus and are moved to a life changing encounter because they discover that Jesus sees something special in them. Amen