

Person Centred Church – Person Centred Challenge

Luke 19:1-10 / Ezekiel 18:21-28

If you go to Twickenham Railway Station and fancy a little bite while waiting for your train, I can recommend the toasted sandwiches in the platform cafe. But the real treat is the sign on the door: “Completely Open” - it's just not a statement you would use in relation to a shop. But you might use it relation to a person. Today our title is Person-Centred Challenge, and we look at the challenges for everyone in the story of Zacchaeus, we'll see how they're connected to the theme of openness.

Jesus Challenges Everyone

Last week I made a mistake. Yes – it does happen! When looking at the story of Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and the woman who wept on Jesus' feet I said that the woman, unlike Simon, received no challenge at all. As soon as I sat down after preaching in the evening, I realised I was wrong. The woman *had* been challenged: She was challenged to walk forward in the forgiveness, dignity, and self-esteem Jesus bestowed on her. Jesus is always challenging, but not always in the way we think he's going to be, or in the way that religious people want him to be. He has a different kind of challenge for each different person he comes across – each person here today. We like to give the same challenges to everyone because our imagination and understanding is limited. But Jesus' challenges are person-centred.

So let's run through the passage to see some of the ways in which Jesus challenges people, and then I'm going to ask “How is Jesus challenging you?”

The Challenge of Being Known

The first challenge to Zacchaeus comes in v.5 and it's *the challenge of being known*.

A trick of the trade for new teachers is to write each child's name at register time, on a desk plan of the classroom. That way they can address them by name and keep them on their toes. We don't know how Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name – the story's told in such a way as to imply that he just knew it by divine revelation. Imagine the shock for Zacchaeus though, to be called out of the tree: “This man knows who I am – how much more does he know about me?” It was same challenge that came to the woman who'd had four husbands: “**Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!**” she said. (Jn 4:29)

Many of us will have experienced this kind of a challenge in some way. I remember deciding to embark on a particular thing and everyone around me saying, “what a fantastic idea!” When I told my dad he said, “Are you sure you want to do this? Are you sure this is really right for you?” And he looked at me with knowing eyes. He didn't have to say, “You're being naïve” or “this decision is really going to cost you”. And of course I went and did it; it was costly at a deep level; and I was glad he challenged me in that way because it helped me understand the unfolding process.

At first, the challenge of being known can be very unsettling. We feel exposed, sometimes foolish, ashamed even, and sometimes we become defensive. But if that “being known” is accompanied by love then it's a whole different ball-game. Insecurity gives way to trust. And that's what we find with Jesus – he knows each of us with an un-nerving accuracy; yet it comes with love. His knowledge is always accompanied by love.

The Challenge of Necessity

The second challenge to Zacchaeus is the *challenge of the necessary*.

“Come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” We don't know exactly why this was necessary – there were doubtless plenty of places Jesus could have stayed, but few of them would have had such impact. On the surface as a reviled tax collector, Zacchaeus would have thought he had little to offer Jesus and his mission, but in fact he was *necessary* to it. **“I *must* stay at your house today.”**

The same is true for each of us. We often say that no-one is indispensable, but the other side of that is that everyone is needed. As a vicar, there are hundreds of things I do just because they're needed. Some of them I'm skilled for; others I have lots of confidence but no skill for (that's dangerous!) and others I have neither skill nor confidence for. So you learn on the job, but you initially did it simply because it was needed.

The challenge of need isn't very person-centred of itself. It doesn't ask, “Now how can I help you develop as a person?” it merely presents itself - and sometimes rather rudely. Fortunately we don't have to respond to that need purely on our own. God's intention for human beings has always to be our Helper – he wants to *help* us to make right decisions. And the right decision today or yesterday might not be the right decision for ever.

Zacchaeus was faced with a need, and I believe the Holy Spirit helped him respond gladly, enabling him to see something in Jesus and to welcome this as an opportunity. The Holy Spirit – God actively here in our lives – transforms the challenge of necessity from being quite “un-person-centred” into becoming highly person-centred, because the Holy Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. Sometimes we're faced with a need and we actually resist the Holy Spirit because we just don't want to do it. We say to ourselves, “that prompting I sense is just misplaced guilt” or “I'm just drawn to help because I have delusions of saving the world” or “I've doing stuff like that for the past ten years, surely I need a break.” Those thoughts may be accurate self-diagnoses, but what is the Holy Spirit saying? If you're not sure, and you have time, seek advice from another Christian. If you're not sure and you don't have time, then probably the situation's desperate and you need to respond anyway!

The Challenge of Jesus' Presence

The third challenge comes, therefore, in the form of *Jesus' presence*.

He went to Zacchaeus' house. And **“all the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'.”** (v.7) But Jesus' presence caused Zacchaeus to behave differently, just like the Holy Spirit's presence causes us to respond to need differently. Jesus' presence polarises. The people are muttering but **“Zacchaeus stood up”** and spoke openly. The people thought Jesus was giving religion a bad name by associating with Zacchaeus, but in fact Jesus was giving Zacchaeus a chance of a *good* name – and he took it. The people had a chance to respond well and with rejoicing that a bad guy had a chance to turn good, but they refused to take it. Meanwhile Zacchaeus also had a chance to change, and he took it with both hands: **“Look Lord, here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”** (v.8)

Jesus' presence challenges us to live differently – and in particular to live more generously. Zacchaeus understood that because he could see so clearly Jesus' generous and accepting attitude towards him. The people looking on were also challenged to live more generously but they shrank back from it. In fact they lived more meanly than ever before.

Jesus' presence is a person-centred challenge because it acts on our person. It doesn't force us into a corner; it doesn't point the finger and often doesn't say anything much at all. But when we allow Jesus to be fully present in our lives he calls forth both questions and answers from within us. You see, what Jesus does is to restore the image within us. We were created with that image but it's been marred by sin. Nevertheless, we still have the raw materials for Jesus to bring out, remould, refashion and put into their proper place.

Emil Brunner once described the effects of sin as being like a chess board that's been knocked in the middle of a game: all the pieces are still there, but some of them are on their sides, others have rolled away, and no-one can really remember or figure out where anything went anymore. But when we allow ourselves to be aware of Jesus' presence we can begin to dialogue with him. And as we have that dialogue so we begin to discover the person we *could* be, the person we're being *called* to be, the person God *intends* us to be. Zacchaeus was having that dialogue and allowing Jesus' person-centred challenge to take place in his life; the people around weren't even prepared to have the dialogue.

The Challenge of Salvation

So Jesus concludes: **“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.”** (v.10) Here's a question:

Did the salvation come when Jesus arrived at the tree where Zacchaeus was sitting, did it come when he accepted Jesus into his home, or did it come when Zacchaeus decided to give his possessions to the poor? The answer is “all three”. We take hold of salvation when we allow ourselves to respond to the challenge Jesus gives. In fact, when we do this, we find the salvation taking hold of us.

And so what are the challenges in front of you? The challenge of being known; the challenge of what's needed; the challenge of Jesus' presence: what is the dialogue Jesus is trying to have with you? Are you avoiding it or are you completely open to it? As members of this church we face specific challenges: If you've read your Day of Commitment letter then you'll know of the challenge to meet our 2009 budget of £238,000; and you'll know of the challenge to PC for one of us to come forward and be Treasurer, or to find someone who can. When we send out those letters we say "pray about it". Why? Is it just because prayer is a good Christian thing to do? No. It's because prayer is entering into that personal dialogue with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. And Jesus helps us move from simply being stuck with a need, and reach towards knowing what we should be doing about it.

How is Jesus challenging you? Maybe its something to do with your home or family life; maybe it's something to do with your personal devotional life; maybe it's something to do with your work; maybe it's something to do with church; many it's something to do with a friend or someone you know.