



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday before Advent Year C

2 Thessalonians 1.1-12

Luke 19.1-10

Last week was Bible Sunday and in many churches this was celebrated with the readings for that day. I chose to follow the lectionary for Proper 25. This week is similar in that November 1st is All Saints day and often this Sunday is celebrated as All Saints Sunday. Once more however I will follow the lectionary readings, so I will look at the passages for the Fourth Sunday before Advent.

Around this time of year in the church calendar there are several important days, All Hallows Eve, which is the eve of all Saint's Day; this is followed by All Souls and of course Remembrance Sunday. The autumn festivals are ones of thanksgiving and of remembrance and as the Sundays now turn to 'before Advent' we begin to think of the coming of our Lord at Christmas. The shops, it appears, have been preparing for Christmas for ages but it is good to turn away from the commercialism and concentrate on the true meaning of Christmas and the wonder of God with us.

Our gospel reading is the story of yet another tax collector, Zacchaeus. First it is important to notice where Jesus is, ^{19.1} 'He entered Jericho and was passing through it.' The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is very well documented in the gospels, notably in the story of the Good Samaritan. It was a twisty mountainous road the haunt of bandits and robbers. It was a dangerous route, but it is not the road that is dangerous for Jesus. The story of Zacchaeus is followed by the parable of the talents and then the ominous words,

²⁸ 'After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.'

What follows, as we know only too well, is his final journey and the danger that awaits Jesus. Here is the hatred and spite that will carry him to the cross.

What happens in this account is that Jesus turns yet another life around. Zacchaeus is a hated tax gatherer. He is an outcast, a sinner in the eyes of the people. He is not just a tax collector; he is a chief tax collector, very powerful and very rich. But there is something more to Zacchaeus, he wants to see Jesus. Why does he? Is it just idle curiosity or is there something more in the depths of this man? Does he recognise in Jesus something special?

² 'A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.' The gospels are full of details that make the stories very immediate and here is another example. Zacchaeus was 'short in stature.' He was so short that he didn't stand a chance because of the huge crowd following Jesus, so he used his wits.

⁴ 'So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.' We are even told the sort of tree he climbed! Once on his perch Zacchaeus was able to see but also he could be a fly on the wall, incognito and out of sight. Jesus would just pass by in the centre of the crowd and Zacchaeus could see him then hop down curiosity satisfied. But Jesus had other plans, as indeed he often has, for unsuspecting people such as Matthew the tax collector and Nathanael under his fig tree.

⁵ 'When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'

There is nothing accidental in this, Jesus stops, looks up and greets him by name. Then tells him what is going to happen; I am going to stay with you. Zacchaeus must have been flabbergasted; firstly Jesus is a celebrity really. The great teacher who some said was the promised Messiah. Zacchaeus is doing very nicely as the world went, he was rich from his ill-gotten gains. No doubt he has powerful friends but really he knew he was an outcast. In his heart he must have known most people despised him as a collaborator and a grinder of the poor. Jesus would be the first to condemn him wouldn't he? To point out his faults, to shun him, a sinner, or so he would have thought. That was another good reason to hide up his tree, no possibility of recognition or retribution. All this must be going through his mind. Then suddenly Jesus stops and calls him by his name.

How many times have we seen Jesus using a person's name to give them back their identity, to rescue them when they were lost? Just think of that single word, 'Mary' at the mouth of the tomb, she is in despair then with one word she is whole again. Now it is Zacchaeus whom Jesus calls and we know he will never be the same. Zacchaeus doesn't hang about, the man of action who scurried up the tree is eager now to get out of it and obey Jesus.

⁶ 'So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.'

Poor Zacchaeus doesn't get time to move. There he stands facing Jesus feeling elated until suddenly his sins come crashing down.

⁷ 'All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Once again the self-righteous start to grumble, why on earth has the teacher gone to eat with a sinner? Jews don't do that. Actually there is no mention of Pharisees or any other sect here. The crowd in general are fed up. No doubt any one of them would have been proud to have welcomed Jesus. A lot of this isn't just he's a sinner, why are you eating with him? A lot of the motivation here is jealousy. Jealousy, humanity's besetting sin is rearing its ugly head again. If we stop to think about it, so much of the trouble in the world is due to this.

Zacchaeus takes the criticism on the chin. In that moment he recognises his wrong doing, publicly confesses it and makes reparation, all unasked.

⁸ 'Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, 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.'

That is why I questioned Zacchaeus' motivation at the beginning. There is something more to this man. He recognises Jesus as 'Lord.' Now Jesus, who has simply stood there looking at Zacchaeus,

holding him in his gaze, is hearing the words he knew he would. Once again, simply by his presence Jesus has turned a life around. Jesus' answer is to the crowd.

'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

As always what Jesus says is two edged. There is teaching for the crowd here. Zacchaeus has done wrong, he is a sinner but he is a son of Abraham. Jesus came to save all humanity and Zacchaeus was a lost soul. A man so entangled in his business affairs, so ensnared by riches that he had been led off the straight and narrow. Yes he was a sinner, but that is exactly whom Jesus seeks to save. Just look at Zacchaeus' repentance and reparation and learn! As for the rest of them, instead of condemning this man it would be better if they looked to themselves. I find myself wondering how many of these people shouted 'Hosanna' at the beginning of the week but denied Jesus in the end. For Zacchaeus all has changed. He has found his Lord, he has been saved. But the central thing to notice here was that Jesus simply called, it was Zacchaeus who responded. It was he who renounced the way of life he had been living; it was he who promised to make reparation and no doubt followed Jesus.

Jesus died for all humanity, he calls us all. It is up to every one of us to respond to the call, to take action, to follow Jesus. Before we do so though, like Zacchaeus, it is up to us to take stock of our lives, see what is wrong, do our best to try again and like Zacchaeus humbly make a new start knowing that Jesus is gazing on us with love.

The epistle reading has moved to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, the set passage is the beginning of the epistle, but before we can look at it I need to put it in its context. Firstly there is some dispute as to whether the second letter to the Thessalonians is indeed written by Paul. There are differences in style and indeed theology. For our purposes however I will take it that Paul wrote it with his co-author and companion Timothy. This would make the date that it was written around 51-52 AD shortly after the first epistle.

We need to go back to look at Paul's missionary journey to understand the reading properly. Chapter one of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians begins,

'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.'

This is so similar to the greeting in our passage.

¹ 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Paul greets the Thessalonians from his co-workers for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He and Silas, (this is the Silvanus mentioned here) had been in Philippi and had preached the message there. Our reflections have dealt with passages from Paul's epistle to the Philippians. We know that both he and Silas were arrested and treated very badly. We have the miraculous story of their night in prison and their formal release when Paul declared his Roman citizenship.

From Philippi Paul moved to Thessalonica. It is in northern Greece about two hundred miles north of Athens. Paul moved down to Athens after his time in Thessalonica and this letter was possibly written from Corinth.

The Greek gods were at the centre of life; there were temples and shrines everywhere. The Romans had conquered Greece and the same was true of Roman gods. These gods were fickle, wrathful and had to be constantly appeased by the fearful worshipers. Add to that the cult of Emperor Worship, because the Emperors had declared themselves gods. Woe betides anyone who did not acknowledge this as fact.

Paul and his co-workers come to Thessalonica after their departure from Philippi, having established a new community of Christians there. They come into that mixture of idol worship. They tell the Good News of the one true God, a God of love. They tell of his Son Jesus Christ, the God who became human and died for love of humanity and of his resurrection and of salvation, the great gift of God freely given through grace. How counter cultural is that. Those people who joined the community of believers in Thessalonica were inspired by his words and committed themselves not only to a new belief but to the new way of life demanded of followers of 'The Way.'

Paul is not bringing the news of yet another god among many. Paul is teaching of Jesus Christ, of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is saying that Christians owe allegiance only to the one true God and will worship no other. Caesar is not Lord, only Jesus is Lord. This put them on a collision course with the authorities; persecution is inevitable.

Paul begins his letter by saying that he is praying for these new Christians and most importantly giving thanks for them. It is so important because prayer is at the centre of Christian life and these people need his prayers and God's help.

³ 'We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.'

Paul is encouraged by the fledgling church in Thessalonica. Firstly their faith is growing, becoming stronger and more steadfast. Their numbers are increasing and most importantly their love for one another is strong. This is at the centre of Christ's teaching, 'Love one another as I have loved you,' and Paul is delighted to highlight this.

⁴ 'Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.'

When Paul uses the word 'boast' it is not our idea of bragging. It is more telling the other churches proudly of the church in Thessalonica and thereby encouraging them. The second point that Paul highlights here is their 'steadfastness and faith' in the face of persecution. We have seen how Paul has faced terrible persecution. He mentions this many times as an encouragement to those who are suffering too. In 1 Thessalonians 2 he says,

^{2.1} 'You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, ²but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.'

It is up to all Christians to stand fast in the faith and boldly proclaim Jesus. Indeed Jesus walked the way of persecution and death and he is the pattern. They must remember that God's promise of salvation through his grace is their reward and crown.

⁵ 'This is evidence of the righteous judgement of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.'

God is the true God, Jesus is the only King. Christians live by another code, often it flies in the face of worldly values. Christians are prepared to challenge what is wrong and authority if need be. People in power do not like to be challenged, their reaction is all too often to lash out and destroy. These

new Christians must understand this, but remember that God is the judge of all and there will be retribution.

⁶ 'For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.'

I began by saying that at this time of the year we begin to look towards Advent. It is during Advent that we look for the coming of our King Jesus, not just at Christmas but at his second coming. If you think of the Advent hymns so many underline this, for example, 'Lo he comes with clouds descending.' It is worth looking at that hymn because it really is saying what Paul is saying in this passage. God will not look the other way when wrong is done, those who are steadfast, who seek to walk in the way of Jesus, will be rewarded; those who do not and spend their time persecuting the followers of the faith will face punishment. Jesus will come again at the dawn of God's recreated order and he will be the just judge of all, the living and the dead.

⁹ 'These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.'

On that day those who have sinned and who sought to do wrong will be separated from the love of God. Those who have followed Jesus and tried to do what is right, sometimes at a terrible cost to themselves, will be safe in God's love. Jesus is the just judge and supreme ruler over all. Jesus is never far from us. These new Christians must have faith that God's Holy Spirit is with them to strengthen and sustain them. They are never far from Paul's thoughts either,

¹¹ 'To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith, ¹²so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

On our own we can do little, in the power of Jesus we can move mountains. This is what Paul is saying. You are not alone; Jesus is within you strengthening you and what you do you do for him and in his name. He is in you as you are in him and he is in the Father. This is the faith that they must hold on to whatever challenges or suffering they must face. People will see the glory of Christ in your actions, says Paul.

The same is as true now as it was then. We may not suffer persecution, though in many lands people find themselves in exactly the same position as these Thessalonians, but in many instances our belief is counter cultural. We need to stand firm in the teachings of Jesus and live it out in our lives. He will strengthen and sustain us. We look forward to his coming when he will judge the living and the dead and we trust in our loving God.

'The day in whose clear shining light all wrong shall stand revealed, when justice shall be throned in might and every hurt be healed.' Frank Lucian Hosmer

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