

Sermon
16 March 2014
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Luke 19:1-10

When we were on holiday in South Africa last summer, we spent a week in a Wild Life Reserve and went on game drives at least twice a day. It was absolutely amazing to be so close to nature, and at the same time share with the boys the things we grew up with... Like the big 5.

On a safari like that, where the animals roam free, it's not guaranteed that you will see lots of animals, but we were very lucky that week. We saw everything we could wish for, including 4 of the big 5: we saw elephants, rhino, buffalo, and lions!

And then, on our very last drive, we told our ranger that we've seen 4 of the big 5, and if we could only see a leopard too, that would make the picture complete. To which he replied that he'd actually seen a leopard early that morning, and he'll take us to the place he saw it. The excitement in that vehicle was high! As you all probably know, leopards are very rarely seen in the wild, because they camouflage themselves very well.

But we drove slowly and were very quiet, and after waiting patiently, at last someone in our vehicle saw the leopard through his binoculars.

I couldn't wait to get a shot of the binoculars – because wouldn't it be just fantastic to go home having seen the big 5 up close, all in one week!!

But when eventually it was my turn to look, I couldn't spot the leopard at all. I was sooooo excited, and the more people explained to me where to look, the less I saw. The leopard was lying down on a flat rock behind a tree, and everybody said that once you spotted it you wouldn't believe that it was hard to see it in the first place – but to no avail.

I didn't see anything. If it was only Andre and myself, I would have thought that he made it all up, that he was just teasing me and *pretended* that he saw a leopard! But there were 8 people in the vehicle, and 7 of them saw the leopard and were very happy about it! I was the only one who couldn't.

I was so disappointed. Reluctantly I gave the binoculars to the next person. I looked away, thinking that at least I've seen so many other amazing animals, I shouldn't be greedy. And then, when I looked back to take one last glance, much calmer this time, I saw the leopard with my bare eyes. Lying on the rock, behind the tree. I couldn't believe it! I was so happy!!

And when eventually we drove back to the camp, I thought that what just happened to me was about more than spotting a leopard, it was a life lesson.

Because sometimes we try so hard to see or understand something, but don't manage to. But then, if we just change our perspective or our attitude, the thing we've been looking for, the solution to our problem, is right under our noses! And it's been there all the time – we've just not been searching for it in the right way...

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Our Scripture lesson this morning was about somebody who very literally learned *that* lesson when he met Jesus. His name was Zaccheus.

Zaccheus desperately wanted to see Jesus, as did everybody else, so there was a huge crowd. Because Zaccheus was not a tall man, he couldn't see over all the people, so he decided to make a plan. He climbed in a tree, so he would have a good view of Jesus when he walked passed.

And didn't this choice he made turn out well?! It changed his life.

Let's take a look at who Zaccheus was. In Luke 19:2 we read 2 things about him: He was the chief tax collector and he was wealthy.

Now to *us*, that sounds quite normal, that's how we talk today: So *what did you say that guy Zaccheus did for a living? He's the chief tax collector. Ah, okay. And I hear he's doing quite well for himself? O yes, he's a wealthy man now!*

But in Biblical times that is not at all what it would sound like. To say that he was the chief tax collector *and* wealthy, would be more like an insult, an accusation – because the Jews despised tax collectors and rich people, and Zaccheus wasn't just any tax collector, he was the very wealthy *chief* tax collector!

Why did they not like tax collectors? Well, because the Romans ruled over the Jews, and taxed them heavily. Tax collectors, quite obviously, collected these taxes for the Romans. But here comes the interesting bit: they didn't earn a fixed salary in this job. As long as they paid the Romans the amount of money agreed upon, they could charge people whatever they liked, and then just keep the excess to make up their own salaries.

So it's easy to understand why the Jews didn't like the tax collectors, because they felt *done in* by them – it felt as if they stole their money *and* at the same time collaborated with the enemy.

The Jews were a proud nation who always stood together, but they felt as if the tax collectors, their *own people* who should have been on *their* side in their struggle against Roman rule, stabbed them in the back.

It's also easy to understand why, then, a tax collector could become wealthy very easily – but taking money from a fellow-Jew and keeping it for yourself was against everything the Jews believed in. They believed that they all belonged to God, and that God gave them all an equal share of everything. They needed to take care of one another and the welfare of the group as a whole always came first.

Therefore, every 7th year, all debt would be cleared, so that the goods could *stay* equally distributed. Which meant that the only way in which someone *could* become rich, was if they were dishonest and didn't adhere to the rules of Jewish society.

So this poor man Zaccheus was doubly despised by his fellow-Jews, because he was a tax collector *and* wealthy. So he became an outcast, not welcome anywhere.

But then he heard of Jesus and most probably also that Jesus doesn't judge. So he forgot all about his important title, given to him by the Roman authorities, and climbed up a tree, with his "suit on and briefcase in his hand", so to speak. Not a very dignified thing to do, but he knew he had to make a plan, otherwise he would never get a glimpse of Jesus.

But he got more than he hoped for! Jesus knew that on the inside Zaccheus wasn't really the man people took him for, that probably circumstances sent him in a direction, a direction that, looking back, he wouldn't have taken.

So without him even realising that Jesus knew he was in the tree, Jesus greeted him, not with something like: Hey Zach, what are you doing up that tree my friend? No, without wasting time with small talk, Jesus said – *I must stay at your house today.*

And with that one sentence Jesus said a lot. He said that he accepted Zaccheus, just the way he was. And where he was an outcast in the eyes of all his people, Jesus regarded him as important enough to stay over at his house, something nobody else would want to do, because nobody would want to be associated with him, but now Jesus *invites himself* to Zaccheus' house. Jesus!

Wow! Zaccheus couldn't believe his ears. With one sentences Jesus made him part of the community again, by means of one act of kindness, in front of a huge crowd of people, even before Zaccheus confesses his sins and promises to pay everyone he has ever stolen from back, in fourfold, even before he said that he would give half his possessions to the poor, before *any* of that happened, Jesus said that he would gladly associate himself with Zaccheus. And if *Jesus* was happy to do that, his followers didn't really have a choice but to do the same.

Jesus reinstated Zaccheus as part of his community, and in those days that was exactly the same as being set free from prison, people who were not a part of their community had no quality of life, they couldn't lead a meaningful life at all... But now all that changed for Zaccheus.

And *all* of this happened, because Zaccheus climbed in a tree. He couldn't see well, so he made a plan. He changed his angle a little, he changed his perspective. And that changed his life.

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Coming back to today: Have you ever been stuck in a situation? Looking for answers without finding any? Are you maybe there *now*?

Maybe you've made a wrong choice, and are struggling to face the consequences; maybe you're just frustrated with where you are in life just now; maybe something happened to you or to someone close to you, something you have absolutely no control over, and you're scared that it will take over your life completely...

If any of this is true for you this morning, God says "don't worry". But don't just curl up in a ball and hope that your problems will go away either. Do something. Grab your binoculars, or if you were using them already, throw them away. Focus, use a magnifying glass if you're struggling to see, or climb a tree.

In other words – change your perspective. Try to look at your situation from a different angle. Or just take a breath. And then look again.

Sometimes the answer isn't where you thought it would be, sometimes the answer doesn't look anything like you supposed it

would, and sometimes the answer comes at a completely different time from when you expected to find it.

The key to *understanding* and *finding* and *accepting* lies in Jesus. Because once your path has crossed Jesus' path, you're whole life changes. Once you went out your way to see Jesus, he'll invite himself to your house, into your life, to stay. And with Jesus in your life, even no answer is an answer, because knowing that he loves you just the way you are, despite what you might have done in your past, despite the fact that you sometimes stumble and even struggle to believe, he still loves you. And *that* love, the love that made him hang on a cross for you, can carry you through anything.

So if you are at your wit's end and you struggle to see Jesus in your life for all the problems that are surrounding and smothering you like a short person in a huge crowd – just climb a tree. Just take a minute to get out of your situation to see better. And even if you don't see an answer to your question, you might see something much better. You might see Jesus himself, Jesus who knew you were there all the time, despite the fact that you hid behind the leaves, Jesus who will tell you to come down, because he has a better life in mind for you, a life where worldly things like money and status are not important anymore, because if you have Jesus in your life, you don't need anything else.

Faith gives you perspective. So don't ever hesitate to use your magnifying glass, because no matter how many difficulties you have

to face, if you take a good look, you'll see that there are always good things in your life too.

May God help us to use this time of lent as a journey towards him. A journey during which we will do anything in our power to see him and his purpose for our lives, even if that means climbing a tree.

Amen