

Sermon: Vindication Text: Luke 19:1-10 November 3, 2019  
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The modern city of Jericho is located in the West Bank, in Palestinian territory, near the edge of Dead Sea. One of most noticeable features of the modern city is the remains of a large United Nations refugee camp, which housed about 30,000 Palestinians fleeing from the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. They fled further east into Jordan during the 1967 war. A few thousand new refugees live in the camp today.

That's fairly recent in history for this city which is in the background in the Gospel today. Jericho has a very long history. It is the oldest city in the world, the oldest continuously occupied settlement on earth. Archeologists have uncovered layers of civilization revealing 20 successive settlements in Jericho, the first of which dates back 11,000 years.

Jericho appears many times in the Biblical narrative. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is taken by Joshua in a battle where the walls "came tumbling down". Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus in Jericho.

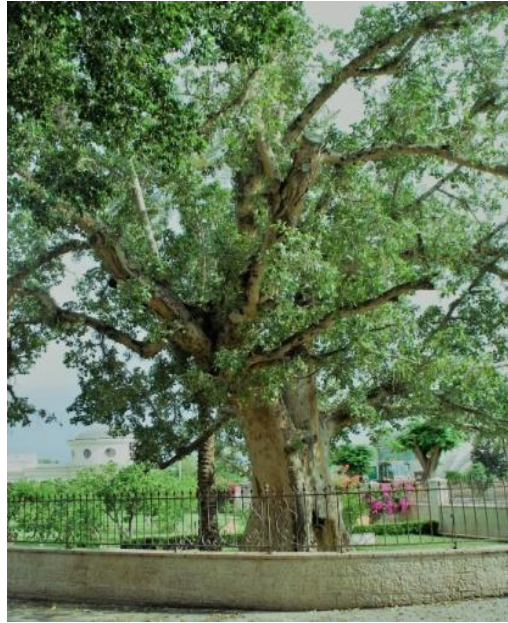
People have been drawn to this ancient place over millennia because, in an arid land, it is the location of a cluster of productive springs – water is plentiful here. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is called the city of palm trees. It's like an urban oasis in a dry land.



Jericho was also a transportation hub for the Jewish people; the story in the Gospel that Joanne read today happens on the road through Jericho.

There were two major highways in Israel in Jesus day and one of them went right through Jericho. Travelling from the north, from Galilee, people would travel through this most ancient city to get to Jerusalem. And on the road through Jericho there was a toll booth, a customs station; travelers had to pay poll taxes on every cow, calf, and camel that passed through customs.

Today's gospel is set at Passover time. This meant that tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims were coming down from Galilee, going around Samaria because it was unsafe, and coming through the toll booth at Jericho and paying their poll taxes. And the chief tax collector in Jericho was a man named Zaccheus. Amid the throngs of pilgrims passing through Jericho was a famous named Jesus. And Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus.



Jericho was a city of trees. Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree. When our Rideau Park pilgrimage group went to Jericho in 2014 we stopped by this sycamore there. It may not be the tree that Zaccheus climbed up but it is old enough to be that tree. Trees in the Holy Land can be very old. Olive trees in Gethsemane, just outside Jerusalem date back to the time of Jesus.

A sycamore tree, like the one on the Gospel is like a fig tree but taller; some 50 to 75 feet tall and some 50 feet wide. It has large leaves, like a maple or an oak tree. A sycamore tree is a shade tree, and so Zacchaeus climbed up and waited. Zaccheus climbed the tree because he was too short to see over the crowd. Or was it Jesus who was too short to be seen in the crowd? The text is unclear.



When Jesus passed by he looked up into the tree and said, “Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m coming to your house this day.” How did Jesus know his name? Why would Jesus invite himself over to this tax collector’s house?

Zacchaeus was the most despised man in Jericho, He was a tax collector; he was the *chief* tax collector. He worked for the Roman government, collecting their taxes; he was hated because he worked for the Empire but untouchable because he was protected by the Empire. What a poor choice Jesus made. Zacchaeus was like all tax collectors a terrible person and everyone knew it. Why would Jesus share a table with this man?

Or did the crowd misunderstand? The name Zacchaeus means “righteous one”. And maybe his name isn’t ironic. The way this story is often read, Zacchaeus, like all tax collectors, is a terrible sinner and having dinner with Jesus leads Zacchaeus to repent. After dinner with Jesus, the chief tax collector changes his ways and proclaims that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back those he has defrauded four times over. That’s the story I learned in Sunday School



But there is another way to read this story. In Luke’s gospel Zacchaeus’ words are written in what scholars call the “progressive present tense.” It’s not that meeting Jesus leads Zacchaeus to begin to be righteous; meeting Jesus gave him the chance to show that he was righteous. Zacchaeus is a hidden saint about whom people have made all sorts of false assumptions. He is a tax collector but an incredibly generous one. Jesus’ arrival is vindicating. It creates opportunity for Zacchaeus to reveal himself: “Lord, I always give half of my wealth to the poor, and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy I always make fourfold restitution.” It’s not something new that he will be doing, it’s something that he has always done.

The crowd had demonized Zacchaeus. But maybe they had it wrong. Maybe their presuppositions, their prejudices, their false assumptions kept them from seeing the real Zacchaeus. Jesus affirms him by inviting Zacchaeus to eat with him and Jesus praises Zacchaeus as “a son of Abraham.” Contrary to popular opinion, this tax collector is righteous and he is a child of God.

*(It's interesting to note that in the Eastern Christian tradition Church Tradition Zacchaeus became a follower the Apostle Peter. And as the tradition goes Peter ordained him Bishop of Caesarea; he was Bishop of Caesarea until a ripe old age.)*



So Zaccheus is misunderstood, judged wrongly; and with Jesus he is revealed as righteous and is vindicated. And he is not the only one in Luke's Gospel who belongs to a hated group, but becomes an unlikely hero. Jesus praises the faith of a Roman soldier, tells us of "good" Samaritan. Luke tells of a Samaritan leper who was the only one to give thanks for his healing, and writes of a tax collector who was more righteous than a Pharisee. Jesus eats with all kinds of outcasts too; in the time of Jesus sharing table fellowship with someone showed deep acceptance and Jesus ate with sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors... Luke's story is full of surprising vindications- people assumed to be bad because of their group are named by Jesus as good.

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"You can't tell a book by its cover. "That old axiom invites us to look beyond appearances, not to make judgements based on what we see on the surface of things.

You can't tell a book by its cover. But then I heard a discussion on CBC radio, a panel of book cover artists talking about their trade. It turns out that a good cover sells a book. A poor cover keeps a good book on the shelf. Money, research and artistic skill are applied to the covers of books, because publishers know that we do judge books by their covers.

On the surface of things Zaccheus is a sinner. His profession marks him as a scoundrel. But Jesus publically accepts him, names him a child of God, a son of Abraham - and it's revealed that Zacchaeus is beyond generous, a profoundly righteous man.

The story of Jesus and Zaccheus invites us to look deeper when we look at others. And if we feel that the world judges us on the basis of superficial things then we can know Jesus sees more deeply, sees who we really are... We are all of us children of God.

