

Luke 19:1-6

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[0:00] Your phone goes off. It's after 10pm. You're wrapping presents this week. And it's a number! that's familiar to you, but you've not heard it from the person for years or seen them.

They're one of your oldest and in some ways closest friends. And there's a message that comes up saying, I'm outside. You open the door and they are there with a beaming face and a bottle of wine and a gift. And it's just a delight to see them again. The joy of unexpected visitors. Happens, doesn't it? Christmas week. People knock on your door who you're not expecting.

It's a joy. But there are sometimes people that come to our front doors who we'd rather not see. Salesmen. Political canvassers. Religious proselytizers.

Maybe it's a friend or a family member that you find particularly difficult. Unexpected visitors are a mixed bag. Some delight us by their coming to our door. Others not so much.

And I want us, in this short time, to consider what kind of unexpected visitor Jesus is. Because Jesus entered our world when few were looking for him. And it's his unexpected arrival that we celebrate each Christmas. And I want to explore tonight, how do we feel about that?

[1:34] And I want to do it by looking at the incident which Leslie just read to us when he met a man named Zacchaeus. And he invited himself for tea. Because even though the Zacchaeus story is not Christmassy. It's not particularly Christmassy. In fact, I can't find anyone else who's preached on Zacchaeus at Christmas. I think it sheds a great deal of light on Christmas. That's why we read it earlier.

It comes from Luke 19. And Luke introduces us to Zacchaeus himself. He seems to have lived in Jericho, where Jesus happened to be that day. He was the chief tax collector, which means he worked for the Roman government by day. And his job was to ensure that taxes were collected from the people of Jericho for the public coffers. And we're told, aren't we, that he was a wealthy man. And as we discover a little later in the story, it seems that some of his wealth was ill-gotten. Some of it he acquired by cheating people. But whatever his past may have involved, at this moment, this guy is part of the crowds of people who are very curious about Jesus. And so keen was Zacchaeus himself to see Jesus that he famously climbs up this sycamore tree to get a better view of him. He's a fairly short fella.

But I want you to notice that it's just not idle curiosity. This isn't just rubbernecking. You know, like the driver who slows down on the road to get a better look at the accident, or someone who cranes their neck over the crowd to get a better look at the celebrity signing autographs.

No, there's far more intent on Zacchaeus tree climbing than that. Listen to what it says in verse 3. Just look down with the green seat. It's the level number 3. He wanted to see who Jesus was. But because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. He didn't just want to get a glimpse of Jesus. He wanted to see who Jesus was. He didn't just want to be able to tell his friends, I'd seen and heard Jesus. It seems he wanted to know about him. Perhaps we could even say that he wanted to know him. So we should ask ourselves, shouldn't we, what is all this fuss about? Why should someone like Zacchaeus want to know this person who he'd never met before? And I'm sure you're aware of this. It seems that Jesus was something of a celebrity in those days. He was the travelling teacher. He'd moved around the kingdom of Israel for months talking about the kingdom of God, and he'd developed a reputation.

People said, you've got to hear this guy teach. He speaks with remarkable authority. The way he talks, it's uncannily wise. But he's also enhanced his reputation by doing remarkable things. He's healed people. People say he's calmed storms. He's fed large crowds with little food. And some people even say he's raised the dead, broken up funerals. And it's for those reasons that Zacchaeus wants to know more. So you can imagine, can't you, Zacchaeus is surprised when Jesus stops right under the tree, where he's perched himself. He looks up and he invites himself

around for dinner. Look at verse 5.

[4 : 57] When Jesus reached the point, the spot, he looked up and said, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. And in that moment, the travelling teacher becomes the unexpected visitor. Not only is Zacchaeus going to get a look at him or have a conversation with Jesus, he's actually going to share a meal with him. This is Jesus, isn't it, ringing the metaphorical doorbell of Zacchaeus' house. This is Jesus texting Zacchaeus and saying, I'm outside. And clearly from Jesus' perspective, from Zacchaeus' perspective, Jesus is an unexpected visitor of the most welcome kind. Look at verse 6. So he came down once. And he welcomed him gladly.

Now, this causes outrage, doesn't it? There's certain people looking on. And the next thing Luke tells us, there were murmurs for a servant of the crowd. They begin to mutter. They begin to mutter. And they say, he's gone to the guest of a sinner. So clearly, Zacchaeus' repetition of Jericho is not brilliant, is it? His repetition was not as favourable as Jesus was. He's known as a sinner with a capital S. People seem to think, it's beneath you, Jesus, for dying with this kind of guy. Wouldn't Jesus be better off going to the home of a local governor? Or attending a charity function with the local business leaders? Why would Jesus be rubbing shoulders with a lowlife like Zacchaeus? And it's an understandable question in some ways. But for those who've been watching and listening to Jesus for any length of time, actually, him going to this guy's house unexpectedly, inviting himself in, it's not a surprise. Jesus did this sort of thing all the time.

And it's not because he saw some untapped potential in Zacchaeus that others didn't see. You won't find Jesus arguing with the description the crowds gave Zacchaeus.

It's just that Jesus loves sinners. And he has the power to change them. The power to redeem their lives, which is exactly what happens on this occasion again. Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus' tax collector, becomes Zacchaeus the reformed cheat. You see, this wasn't just a memorable dinner party and a pleasant experience that Zacchaeus could tell his grandkids about. Jesus turning up at Zacchaeus' house left him with some serious questions to think about. It left him with some questions to answer about Jesus' identity and about his own relationship to God and about his own way of life and about the choices that he's made. Listen to how Luke describes what happened to Zacchaeus. It's verse 8 if you glance down. Zacchaeus stood up and he said to the

Lord, look Lord, here and now I give half my possessions to the poor and if I choose anybody out of anything I will pay back four times the amount. Notice what he calls him. He calls Jesus Lord. It seems, doesn't it, that Zacchaeus has already begun to answer the question of Jesus' identity. And it also seems that Zacchaeus has begun to answer the question about his own life and his own choices. He's started to do a U-turn here. He's starting to make different choices. Choices that prefer the needs of others rather than his own. And it is meeting Jesus that has given him the insight and the power that he needs to start living in a different direction. And that's why we can't resist the conclusion here that Jesus is much more than a teacher. He's more than a travelling showman. Jesus is not someone just to be curious about.

[9 : 05] He demands responses from people. He's looking to change lives. Because he loves sinners with the heart of God. And that is why Luke finishes this section with his own words. And these words show us, show us Jesus' identity. They show you in many ways the meaning of Christmas.

They tell us who Jesus thought he was and what he came to do. Can you just see verse 9? Jesus said to him, today Zacchaeus, salvation has come to your house. Because this man too is the son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus calls himself the son of man. It's the language he uses to talk about himself right the way through Luke's cross tongue. And it underlines his humanity. Even though he comes from God.

And salvation, being rescued, has come to the home of Zacchaeus on this occasion. Zacchaeus is like Abraham and Israelites of faith. And God has met that faith with the gift of salvation. Salvation is a Bible word that describes what God does for a person when they turn to him. What does God do if you will call to him tonight and trust his son? Well it involves forgiveness of sin. And a welcoming to God's family and certain promises for the future.

salvation. Salvation, that is the key word here. And he reiterated, reiterated in verse 10, doesn't he? To seek people who needed saving and to save them. The son of man came to seek and to save the lost. And that's the verse that made me think this week that the Zacchaeus narrative would be a really good one to reflect on at Christmas time. Because verse 10 is not just about Zacchaeus. It's not just saying that he came to Zacchaeus' house to seek and save the lost. He's saying that about

his whole life. He's saying that is why Jesus came to earth.

And in that way the story of Zacchaeus is really a little microcosm of the whole. Life and purpose of Jesus. What Jesus does for him, Jesus does for the world. And that's why we celebrate Christmas every year. Because the Zacchaeus story answers the six million dollar question. Why did Jesus come? Why was this baby born? Why did Jesus enter the world? Why did God send him? Why did God send him? Well, he sent him to seek and to save the lost.

[12 : 03] People who are lost like Zacchaeus. People who are lost like me. People who are lost like you. I read a great story this week of two Australian backpackers who bluffed their way into a professional golf tournament in North Korea. They were over there to play a bit of polo. They managed to get in just to play a bit of polo. But they heard about this prestigious golf tournament.

So they got some green blazers made up with the Australian logo and they registered for the event. The tournament organisers were totally taken in and believed that they were the Australian golf team. They were very surprised that they'd been sent. And so these two guys were given a chaperone and a tour of the country for five days. The only problem is they weren't very good at golf. The news report said of one of them, I hit 120 and my caddy told me I had brought green shame to my family. Talk about unexpected business. Two cheeky lads, aren't they?

Turning up unannounced. Turning up unannounced like Zacchaeus did that first Christmas. All of a sudden there is a baby lying in a manger outside the back of some guy's hotel on the outskirts of Bethlehem. There's no journalist to write up the story. There's no cameraman. There's no dignitaries that have been sent to welcome him. It seems, doesn't it, that no one was expecting the Messiah to turn up in that way. Though we should acknowledge that his coming wasn't entirely unannounced. There were those angels singing to the shepherds in fields.

There was the star we sang about with the wise men that they followed from the east. Perhaps more importantly there were the words from many Old Testament prophets that predicted that he would be born in Bethlehem and that he would enter the world as a child. So we can really only say, can't we, that Jesus turned up unannounced, sort of, but in a real sense he did. There is very little sign, isn't there, that people were expecting him. Like Zacchaeus, that morning, he had no idea that Jesus would be there for tea that night. And so Jesus' entrance into the world one day was business as usual. In Bethlehem, business as usual one day, the saviour of the world lying in a manger the next. And what's more, he's come to invite himself in. Did you notice that in Zacchaeus' story, Zacchaeus doesn't invite Jesus to dinner? Jesus invites himself. And Jesus' unexpected arrival in the world is similar. He hadn't come at the invitation of humanity. He came of his own accord, sent by the Father. And he came not to be applauded unwelcomed. He came to reach out to people. He came not expecting to be sought, but seeking.

He came to seek the lost. And some people welcomed him with joy, like Zacchaeus did in Luke 19. When Jesus said he was coming for dinner, Luke says Zacchaeus welcomed him gladly. And the same was when Jesus came into the world. Many didn't notice him. But some knew, some grasped how significant the birth of this baby really was. And they rejoiced, like the shepherds, like Mary, Joseph.

[15 : 43] Like the wise men, like Samuel and Anna in chapter 2. These people welcomed him gladly. Like Zacchaeus would come. And some of them understood why Jesus had come, really come. And he came into the world with a purpose. And that purpose could not be expressed more perfectly than verse 10 of Luke 19. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. It's not a commentary on the Zacchaeus story, but on the incarnation that God became man. It's a commentary on the whole purpose of Jesus' life. Luke 19 tells us that Jesus was an unexpected visitor in the home of Zacchaeus. But that first Christmas, Jesus was an unexpected visitor in the world. And yet he turned up for a reason.

And it was the same reason that he sat down for John with Zacchaeus. He came to seek people, who needed saving, and to save them. And just as Jesus' visit to Zacchaeus left him with questions to answer, so Jesus' visit to the world leaves you and I with questions to answer.

Similar questions that Zacchaeus was pondering. Questions about Jesus' identity, and about our relationship to God, and about ourselves, and our way of life, and our choices.

And I realise that that is quite uncomfortable tonight. Because most of us, we would prefer, wouldn't we, that Christmas was just magical. And even that is beyond some people's ambitions.

Some of us are just hoping to survive Christmas. To make it through to the other side without yelling at a family member or collapsing in a corner. But even those who have loftier hopes for Christmas,

very rarely will there want to be serious thought. We just want to be swept up in it. We just want to enjoy the warm feelings that come with it. We want to be transported out of the hand drum of life and experience the magic of Christmas. And Christmas is magical in lots of ways. But alongside the magic of Christmas, there are very serious realities to consider.

[18 : 06] And I want to make an earnest plea with you tonight. To take even a little time to think and to ponder the questions that Jesus has left us to answer. Who is he? Why did he come?

And who am I in relationship to God? You see, verse 11 really is a brilliant summary of Christmas. But it's very, very challenging, isn't it? For the Son of Man comes to seek and to save the lost. Am I willing to accept that I'm lost? Do you remember the days without Google Maps? The days when you would get infuriated as you were driving around and angry with the other passengers and angry with everyone else? And in the end, you would have to stop going down your window and in all humility, through gritted teeth, ask someone for directions. It's a painful thing to admit, you're lost. Children, if you haven't been to the supermarkets and you lose sight of your mum and dad, it's a terrifying thing, isn't it? To admit that you're lost.

Luke 15, Jesus tells three brilliant stories. He tells a story about three lost things. There's a coin that is lost. There's ten coins. And one coin is lost. And the woman searches diligently. And when she finds it, she has great joy.

But if she doesn't find it, it'll be lost forever. And then he tells a story about the lost sheep. There's a hundred sheep and one goes missing. And the shepherd leaves the 99 safe and he goes after the one sheep.

[19 : 45] And when he finds it, there's great rejoicing. But if the shepherd doesn't find the sheep, it's lost forever. And the story about the lost son. The lost son who goes away from his father.

He treats his father as if he was dead. And he goes into the far country. And he comes to his senses. And he comes back to his father. It's a wonderful story. And the father welcomes him with open arms.

But if the son is not found, he's lost forever. And I want to say, it takes great humility to accept your lost, doesn't it?

And I need salvation. Does my life need to change? And I think Christmas is just a great invitation for you to consider those things. But I need forgiveness.

I spoke at a University of Carleton's in Belfast on Monday. It's absolutely packed out. Rock, Joy to the World. It's a pretty unbearable thing.

[20 : 46] I spent loads of time trying to convince them that they were sinners. And I think it was probably a bit of a mistake. Because I don't need to convince you of that. Do I? It's not that you're more sophisticated in London than you are in Belfast.

But if you know yourself, and you know others too, and you know the world that you live in a little bit, and you can see through the presentable exterior of your own life, and the lives of others just a little bit more, that you will have some insight into the mess and the mistakes that you've made.

And the tragedy and the terror of this world that we call home. And I hope it's becoming clearer to you that as you think about life, you need more than a nice home, and you need more than a satisfying occupation, and you need more than just a few nice holidays.

Because there are things going on in my life, and probably, in fact, definitely in your life, that you need deeper answers for. And I think as you get older, I think we become more and more willing to admit that actually we do need forgiveness.

That I am lost, and I do need salvation. And my life does need to change. And I actually need God. And I need His Son, Jesus Christ.

[21 : 58] And so my attitude for Christmas is changing. I still appreciate the magic of it. And I still enjoy its many blessings, and endure some of its endiosyncrasies.

But I'm looking for something more from Christmas. I'm looking for a few moments to ponder the deeper questions. I want to accept the invitation that Christmas gives me to think about my life, and about God.

About the baby in the manger. About whether He is the Saviour that I actually need. And I really hope that you are open to that too.

That you'll stop just for a few moments, and reflect, and allow these questions to penetrate your defences, just a little bit. But I hope you'll be willing to hear the question that Jesus leaves us, asking ourselves, who is He?

Could it be true that I'm spiritually lost, and in need of saving, and in need of forgiveness? Could it be that my life does need to change? Could it be that Jesus who came to seek, and to save the lost, is the very Jesus that I need?

[23 : 01] Not just tonight, but every day. When Zacchaeus had Jesus enter his house, he was an unexpected visitor. He was lost. But Jesus didn't leave him that way, did he?

He sought him. He found him. He forgave him. Forgave him. He saved him. And when Jesus entered our world as an unexpected visitor, He came for lost people like you and me.

To seek us. To save us. And so Zacchaeus becomes a model for us, as someone who responds to Jesus in the wisest possible way. He wanted to see who Jesus was, and he welcomed him gladly, and then he turned from his sin.

And he changed. And this Christmas, he urged you to do the sin. To get to know who he really is, to welcome him eagerly, and then to change, as we turn from our sins.

And that is what I want to do this Christmas, and I hope it might be what you want to do. Because amidst the wonderful magic of Christmas, there are some very important questions to answer, and above all, this one. Will I embrace, and love, and submit my life to Jesus?

[24 : 15] For he came to our earth, to seek and to save the lost. Or you can pretend, that you are not lost.

And that just ends up a disaster, isn't it? That's fine.