

LUKE 19: 1-9, PHIL.2: 1-11, Lent series: Sharing God's Love,
Deeper by Discipleship (Zacchaeus), 18 March 2018, both.

Father, you have given us so much. Teach us how to share freely with others, by your Spirit. Amen.

So this morning we are thinking about the third part of our Mission Statement, Sharing God's Love. We've talked about our own relationship with God, and how we come to know and love him through prayer and worship; and we've thought about how we show the love of God towards each other, in fellowship, in building up and encouraging the church community. Now we are thinking about what all that is preparing us for. God doesn't give us all this just so we can have a nice time and feel good, or even feel that we are saved! Someone clever Christian once wrote that the Christian Church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of non-members!

Our commission from God, once we have turned to him and accepted Jesus as Lord, is to do what Jesus did: it is to go and share the Good News with others who don't yet know of his love. Our job is to share God's Love.

Now when we think of doing this, some of us might start to panic and think – I'm not a Billy Graham, I don't know how to do this. Well, fear not, you don't have to be a Billy Graham. He was amazing – but he was exercising the gifts God had given him. Your gifts will be different, but they are still to be used in the service of God's message of love and hope and truth.

Some of you may have been using the little Lent Book this year. A few weeks ago I was struck by the incident when people have started to take offence at what Jesus is teaching, and have begun to drift away from him, saying that it is all too hard. This must have

been a challenging time for Jesus, and it is poignant to read that he turns to his twelve disciples, his closest, and only friends, and asks them: "And you too, do you also want to leave?" Peter speaks for them, replying, "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life." The reflection for that day's reading was "What is it about Jesus that makes you want to follow him even when it is hard or puzzling?"

I think that is a key question. "What is it about Jesus that makes you want to follow him even when it is hard or puzzling?" If we can answer that question, I think we then know what it is we have to share with others. What is it about Jesus that makes *me* want to follow him? Is it the miracles – like the feeding of the five thousand, or the extraordinary healings? I remember my old Mum saying once, many years ago, that it would be an awful lot easier to believe if we could see the odd miracle now and then, and that it must have been easier back then when Jesus was there in the flesh. But I'm not really sure that's true; yes, the miracles are pretty impressive, but clearly not everyone who witnessed them was totally convinced. Jesus' miracles didn't necessarily mean that people recognised him as the Son of God. After all, many of those who saw his miracles ended up calling for Jesus to be crucified.

So is it the suffering, the cross and the blood sacrifice of Jesus that make us want to follow him? Well, that is clearly a big part of the whole picture, which makes sense when we see the real power in the resurrection and ascension, the conquest over evil and death.

But I think what really makes *me* want to follow Jesus is the same as for Peter: Jesus has the words of eternal life. Now eternal life doesn't just mean an existence going on for ever after we die. Eternal life is here and now, it must run backwards as well as forwards – otherwise it wouldn't be eternal, would it?

Jesus brings *life* to people, new hope, new purpose, new life, and nowhere is that new life illustrated more clearly than in the story of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is just an ordinary sort of bloke, doing his job, trying to make a bit on the side, no doubt finding all sorts of ways of justifying to himself the taking of a bit here and a bit there. He's not totally evil, he's just looking out for himself, bending the rules a bit – no-one will notice, will they? And clearly he'd been getting away with for quite a long time.

But Zacchaeus is curious about this fellow Jesus and wants to see what all the fuss is about. So he puts himself in a place where he can see: he makes an effort to get that little bit closer. And Jesus notices him, tells him to come down out of his tree. What on earth did Zacchaeus think at that point? 'Oh no! I'm for it now! They say this man Jesus knows all about people, what if he knows all about me!' I bet his guilty conscience made him pretty anxious about what was coming next. But does Jesus accuse him of anything, does he rebuke him for cheating and stealing from the people? No, he just tells Zacchaeus that he is going to stay at his house that same day. And that's it. Zacchaeus is never the same again. He promises to give away half his money to the poor and, if he has cheated anyone, to pay them back four times the amount. That's quite a promise. A new life.

That's what makes me want to follow Jesus: the compassion, the grace and the mercy that he shows to everyone. There are so many examples, besides Zacchaeus: the woman caught in adultery, Mary Magdalene, the Prodigal Son – examples and stories of people who have got things wrong in their lives, often through their own fault, people who are transformed by the love and mercy of God, shown through Jesus.

We might have compassion for those whose life goes wrong because of some abuse they may have suffered, or hardships, difficulties of various kinds. We might not find it so easy to have compassion on those who have just been foolish, or wilful. But Jesus doesn't judge people like that: Jesus sees straight into the heart of people: he knows where they have gone wrong and he knows that they can be changed. Jesus knows that inside each and every one of us there is a God-shaped person just waiting to be released! Sometimes we are pretty blind to that truth, and sometimes we will be disappointed: even Jesus was disappointed sometimes – as when the rich young ruler walked away from his words of life.

But Jesus never gave up, just because not *everyone* heard his words and received them in their heart. Nor must we give up. I think sharing God's love is all about doing a Zacchaeus! We need to have our eyes and our minds opened so that we can see the God-shaped person in the people around us, the folk among whom we live and work. If we were only able to see the need and the potential in them, as Jesus saw the need and the potential in those he met, we would be much more ready to share with them the words of life that Jesus has spoken to us.

Jesus saw Zacchaeus and saw in him a man in need of acceptance. Zacchaeus was surprised with joy at finding himself loved by God. But he didn't say: Oh jolly good, that's nice! He heard the call of Jesus and knew that life would never be the same. Once we have heard the call of Jesus, we are launched onto a lifelong journey of transformation. We are expected to grow, to change; we are expected to give up our old ways and attitudes, and to have the rough bits chipped off us one by one; we are expected to learn how to look at this world with God's eyes, rather than through the lens of our own selfishness. As that transformation takes place, we will become witnesses to the power of God at work in us.

Then, it isn't a matter of having the right words to explain the Christian Gospel. It's a matter of being the person God wants us to be and not being afraid to acknowledge that the source of our love, our compassion, our hope and our joy is our faith in God as revealed to us in Jesus.

A well-known Christian teacher once said "A Christian is someone who has met one." That takes a bit of thinking about: "A Christian is someone who has met one." That's not obvious, is it? But I think what he meant is that when we surrender ourselves fully to God, when we let him change us and fill us with his love, then it will be obvious to those we meet that we have met God! The love of God will shine out from us as we learn to let ourselves become channels of his love. I am sure that the people who met Zacchaeus after his encounter with Jesus would have no doubt that Zacchaeus was now living his life for God. And that showed not only in his own, new-found joy, the joy of knowing that he was accepted and loved by God. But it showed also in the way he lived, in his concern for honesty and justice and truth, in his care for others.

Zacchaeus meets Jesus, and thereafter his focus shifts away from himself, away from his own self-interest, and onto the needs of the people around him, especially the needs of the poor. All Saints' church in Keighley has been hosting the Inn Churches this week, providing hot meals and a bed in a warm place for the homeless. That is a brilliant way to share the love of God. But it's only once a year. What can we do the rest of the time? What are the needs in *our* community? Poverty is probably not the main problem in Oakworth. It seems that many people in our area are suffering from mental health problems, the kind of problem that isn't obvious, but is lurking just below the surface for many people. How can we address those needs? How can we help others come to know that they are loved and cherished by God? How can we make space for people in our own lives, and indeed in our church? How can we

open up the conversations that will enable them to express their fears, their hopes? We don't have to have all the answers. Our job is to listen, with loving attention, and gently point others towards the God that we know. We can only share with others what we have already received. That's all we are expected to do. Which brings us back to that question at the beginning: what is it that makes you follow Jesus? What have you received from God that keeps you wanting to walk in his way? Only you can answer that. And only you can share your experience of the love of God with others, and let them see that new life can be theirs too. Amen.