

Luke 19:1-10

Hi, I'm Andrew and, on behalf of St John's Penge, thank you for listening.

This morning I will be reading Luke 19:1-10, giving a short talk on its meaning for us and ending with a short prayer.

We know that it is not the same as hearing a talk in church, but in line with our vision to Care, Involve and Build, and to make St John's a home for everyone, we need to continue being God's community in Penge.

So, over the coming months, much of what we would have preached, we will instead record and share through the website.

We hope you find it helpful.

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'

⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'

Things have changed dramatically over the past week and I could not have imagined even 6 days ago that I would be sharing my sermon through a recording.

I could, then, focus this talk on the huge, unprecedented challenges we are all now facing, about the size of the crisis – from the anticipated overwhelming of our health system, the impact on the economy, especially those in unstable employment, or the impact of social distancing.

But, frankly, you can turn on any TV, any radio, and hear these things – true as they are.

All I will say is this – if ever there was a time for Christians to act as God has called us, then it is now.

Give to the foodbank, check your elderly neighbours are alright, answer Sue's email about support you can give, even remotely, to vulnerable members of the church – there are

many ways to help, to live out our faith, and even though this is a scary time, we have the hope of eternal life.

Because today, rather than focus on the scale of the crisis, I want to focus on the unprecedented and immense size of our God and His love for us.

It is knowledge of that love, living in that love, focusing on God and submitting our lives to His work, that will heal this world – a deep healing to the hearts of all.

That is what the morning's passage is about – it is about how big our God is.

Not the all-conquering overlord, flashing thunderbolts, kind of big (although He is that too).

But the loving, caring, wrapping His arms around any hurt, pain or loneliness, kind of big.

This is a God to whom no obstacle in our lives is too big for him to move, who can change the hearts of the most obstinate, selfish people, and calls us all to be His children.

As the song goes – our God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing that he cannot do!

In the passage for this morning we meet Zacchaeus – he was a tax collector, he was wealthy and he was not a nice person.

To understand why what Jesus did was so big and controversial, we have to know a bit more about what a tax collector was.

They weren't hated just because they collected taxes – in our society, whilst many don't like paying tax, it is a social good,

because it allows the government to build and maintain roads, to fund the NHS, to fund the emergency services, to support the most vulnerable people through the welfare system, to administer the justice system, etc. etc.

Taxes in our society are not a bad thing, they are important (and people who avoid them are wrong!).

But a tax collector in Jesus' day was a very different thing.

They had a form of franchise agreement with the Romans – just like our train system – they paid a price to the Roman state for the right to collect taxes from everyone in their area, and then whatever they collected they were able to keep.

So, as an example, they paid 1000 denarii to the Romans, who allowed them then to use the soldiers to collect as much as they could, maybe 2000 denarii, from the people in the surrounding area that they could then keep.

This worked for the Romans, as they had a steady income, and it worked for the tax collectors, who became like local mafia bosses, demanding money from businesses and individuals or they would send the soldiers round to smash them up.

That is what Zacchaeus was – he was not a nice man.

Despite this something stirred within him – he heard of Jesus and wanted to see him and hear him.

Maybe his conscience, maybe just curiosity, but the Jesus dramatically took this small opening, reached out and overturned Zacchaeus' life.

Verse 5 'When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today"'

And Jesus' intervention had a huge impact – because however big the obstacles in Zacchaeus' life, they were nothing compared to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus was a mobster, an exploiter of the weak, a selfish, greedy and cruel man, but one day the love of Jesus utterly transformed him.

That is the size of God's love.

We are facing huge changes in our lives, we are uncertain of the future; we are worried for ourselves, our loved ones and our world.

But the message of the gospel is this – God's love is bigger than anything, it can reach round, through, over or under anything going on in our lives in the lives of others or the world around us.

It can transform the meanest of people and the bleakest of situations.

Romans 8:38-39, in one of my favourite passages, Paul says this:

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any

powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

That is the message of the gospel, at all times and in this time; in all challenges and in this challenging moment.

What should we do then?

First thing, make sure you leave an opening for Jesus.

Zacchaeus was not transformed by climbing a tree, Jesus did all the transforming

But in climbing the tree Zacchaeus left a tiny opening for Jesus to act.

We don't know why Zacchaeus did this – curiosity, conscience or just a whim – but we do know what happened next.

So, whether out of curiosity, conscience or whim, leave an opening for Jesus to change you and your life.

He will do the hard work - we are saved by faith and not works - but rest assured that his love is a transforming love.

Second thing, in this time of trial, it is more important than ever that we act as Jesus called us to act.

Even the most horrible, unfair and nasty people are loved by God and with God's help can turn their lives around.

We are all sinners.

Look for openings to share God's love, through giving to the foodbank, through letting someone who is lonely in this time

of social distancing call you to talk, through doing the shopping for an older neighbour or making a meal for someone in self-isolation.

It is also about telling people about Jesus – this isn't easy and I find it hard to do – but it is important that we act like Jesus and share his message when there is even a small opening.

Because God is bigger, his love is greater, and his power surpasses even the greatest obstacle – be that the coronavirus, the social isolation and the basic needs we face at the moment; or the obstacles in our lives that we build ourselves.

Nothing is too big for our God.

I am going to finish by reading Romans 8:38-39 once again:

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Lord, in your name we trust.

We know that you are bigger than any challenge or trial or obstacle.

That your love is overwhelming, and it is for us all.

Keep us, good Lord,

under the shadow of your mercy.

Sustain and support the anxious,
be with those who care for the sick,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may find comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.