

September 18th 2011: The Celebration of Success: Luke 19:1-9

In preaching about the parable of the lost son over the last two weeks I was reminded that in each one of the lost/found stories that Jesus told in Luke 15—the lost sheep, coin, and son—there is always a celebration at the end of the story. In each case the one who finds the lost or, in the story of the lost son, the one who claims the lost son back, celebrates their success with a party. They express their joy publicly.

Now of course those three parables were just stories that Jesus told, but in fact Jesus Himself seems to have got quite excited....quite jubilant....when in an actual incident He, as the seeker of souls, drew a lost child of Israel back into the fold.

It happened in the town of Jericho and is recorded in Luke 19. Towards the end of Luke chapter 18 Jesus had predicted His death and then, with His disciples, had commenced His final journey to Jerusalem by passing through Jericho.

Now resident in Jericho at that time was a tax collector named Zacchaeus. His name is familiar to many of us. We know him as the guy who had lots in the way of wealth but little in the way of height. He was a Jew who worked for the hated Romans and although this got him plenty of money, it made him a traitor in the eyes of his countrymen. Isolated from his people and the worship of his God.

But he had heaps of the good stuff, other tax collectors as friends, and he could cope with a fair bit of antagonism when he was rich and powerful and those who didn't like him were weak and poor. He was no doubt reasonably happy with his lot and only sought to see Jesus out of curiosity, driven by some strange yearning to do so deep inside. For surely curiosity alone would not have made him climb a tree to see Jesus, for in doing so he opened up himself to the embarrassing possibility of being spotted there by someone who would recognize him.

And spotted he was, by the one person who everybody was looking at—Jesus. And when Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately I must stay at your house today.”, there could be no doubt who Jesus was talking to, and where he, Zacchaeus, was.

But rather than being embarrassed, Zacchaeus was really glad to be found by Jesus that day. There was this connection that Jesus made between Him and Zacchaeus that changed him forever.

According to what Jesus said about him later, Zacchaeus was lost. He was stranded in a place of hopelessness, cut off from God and vulnerable to the insidious powers of evil in this world. And yet if you had asked him before he met Jesus whether he thought he was lost like that, he no doubt would have replied, ‘no way’. I might be hated because of my job and a bit out of favour with God because I don’t worship Him as I should. And sure I do cheat a little as far as the taxes are concerned, but who wouldn’t in my position. But lost and needing a Saviour to rescue me! No!! I’m rich. I’ve got everything I need for this life and I cope with the next when it comes; I’m not lost.

It’s an attitude that we recognize for it may well have been our attitude before we met Jesus, and it most surely is the attitude of many around us who say that they believe in God but do nothing about it. But Zacchaeus was just as lost as the sheep or the coin or the son in the parables that Jesus told. And it was only because he heard about Jesus, was inwardly compelled to see Him, and heard Jesus speaking directly to him and calling him by name, that he realized how lost he was. How much he needed this Jesus as his friend and Saviour.

This is a picture of evangelism. Someone must have told Zacchaeus something about Jesus and that was sufficient to compel him to check out Jesus for himself. And then in doing so he discovered how much he wanted Jesus in his life.

The inward transformation of Zacchaeus was obviously great, because the outward signs of change were immediately apparent. He gave half of his wealth away to the poor and the only reason, it seems, he only

gave half was because he needed what was left to fulfill the very next pledge he made. Look at Luke 19:8

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."

But it was not Zacchaeus I was thinking about when I read this passage—it was Jesus. For even as in the lost/found stories that Jesus told in Luke chapter 15 we discover the Shepherd, the woman, and the Father all getting really excited when they found what they were looking for, so in this actual incident I reckon we see Jesus getting really excited when He found and recovered for God's Kingdom, Zacchaeus.

Look at what He said in v9

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 what was lost."

I wonder how you imagine Jesus speaking these words? What tone of voice do you think He used? Because I reckon He was really excited and joyful over what had just happened. And I reckon He would have yelled out—'Today Salvation has come to this house.....For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost, and today it has happened right here with this man Zacchaeus. Today is a success, and I want you to celebrate that success with me and Zacchaeus.

Some of you may remember the little song we would sing in Sunday School about this story:

***Zacchaeus he was a very little man, a very little man was he
He climbed right up into a sycamore tree for Jesus he wanted to see
And when the Saviour passed that way he looked up in that tree
And said, Zacchaeus wont you come down
For I'm coming to your house for tea.***

Well I think Jesus may well have said, "I'm coming to your house for a party"!

With Church Together happening in a month's time I have been thinking a bit about the guest speaker, Tony Campolo. And the other day I picked up one of his books just to flick through and amazingly so, the first thing I read was a story about a party.

Tony had arrived in Honolulu from the East Coast of America and because of the time difference he found himself at 3.30am still wide away and hungry. So he went out to look for a café that was open at that time in the morning, and the only one he found was a really sleazy joint. This is what he writes(from *The Kingdom of God is a Party* p4-9):-.....

When I read that I thought again how excited Jesus is when someone connects with Him. When they hear Him calling their name and open their hearts up to Him. And maybe this morning you are that someone. Like Zacchaeus you sense Jesus calling your name and drawing you to Himself, because he loves and cares for you so much. Jesus is excited over you today.

And for us who know Jesus so well, this story of Zacchaeus reminds us anew how much joy there is when someone who is lost spiritually is found. And it's a joy that Jesus encourages us to be part of as we seek to live out God's love towards others. And we need to be reminded anew that this is why we strive so hard to run programmes and meet the needs around us in this community. So that along the way Jesus will touch a life like He touched Zacchaeus, and the joy we will share with Him then, will make all the struggles and hard work so worthwhile. For that is a party we just wont want to miss.

