

## COME DOWN FROM THERE

### *Sermon for Pentecost 24C-Lk 19:1-10*

LPC, 11/3/13

Some Bible scenes really lend themselves to cinematographic thinking.

Picture a crowd gathering. Some sort of celebrity is expected. There's excitement and electricity in the air. Perhaps this can be conveyed by a hand-held camera and a rapidly shifting point of view. People are chattering, smiling, jostling, craning their necks to see, perhaps holding their cell phones aloft to capture a scene not visible from ground level.

Most of the crowd is very casually dressed: a lot of jeans and T-shirts, a few backward baseball caps, many weathered or careworn faces. At the back of this crowd a man is struggling to get through. He is distinguished by his unusually short stature as well as by his appearance. He's got an expensive haircut, manicured nails, a silk suit and a Rolex watch. The more plainly-dressed people glance around to see who is pushing them. They see the man's high-class get up. A few of them recognize him, whisper to their neighbors and close ranks to prevent him getting through. If they look at the man at all they sneer, knowingly exchange glances with their friends and snicker.

Meanwhile, the short, well-dressed man is jumping up, trying to see. Perhaps he himself raises his own cell phone, clicks, pulls it down, sees he's got nothing, shakes his head in frustration. He glances at his Rolex, seems impatient. You can tell he's afraid he's going to miss something. Something important to him is about to pass him by and he can't let that happen.

He scans his surroundings intently. The camera shifts rapidly from side to side, then settles on a nearby tree beside the road. The man runs to it, starts to shimmy up. One of his Italian loafers comes off. He watches it fall, makes a decision, and keeps climbing. He tears a manicured cuticle, sucks it briefly, keeps going. Reaching a perch with a view, he looks around, at first expectantly, then frantically. Oh no! Has he missed his chance? You can tell he's focusing further and further away.

Suddenly, at close range, almost nose-to-nose, a face takes up the screen. Although the aspect is so startling that the man almost falls out of the tree, the face's eyes are kind, slightly crinkled with amusement. "Come on down from there, Zack," the face says, "Let's go back to your place."

The rest of the story is almost anti-climactic after that, but it's important. The man's life changes because of this encounter. It's probably necessary to depict the set-up in such detail only to show how important this meeting is to Zacchaeus. The grace, the kindness, the humor, the common humanity that Jesus shows Zacchaeus breaks open his heart. A member of a

notoriously dishonest profession, Zacchaeus vows to reform, to show compassion because he has been shown compassion, perhaps for the very first time. A true encounter with Jesus tends to have that effect.

That's probably a sign of what a true encounter with Jesus is all about. It's not enough to just have a warm feeling. Probably lots of people saw Jesus pass that day, but Zacchaeus is the one whose life was changed. But first he had to come down. A true encounter with Jesus results in generosity and compassion. But first we have to come down.

Come down from what? From our own self-importance, self-involvement, our dearly held expectations and respect of empty convention. We need to come down from the illusion we can make it on our own and can earn God's approval through our own effort. We need to come down from understanding God in our own image, rather than ourselves in God's image. We need to come down from our preconception of what Jesus is and what a life of faith means. We need to come down to have our hearts broken open.

Jesus saves us, yes, but that's not an end in itself. Jesus saves us in order to raise us up. If we come down from our own self-importance, Jesus is able to raise us up to Jesus' own level of generosity and compassion.

Now, generosity and compassion are homely things, and can only be conveyed at ground level. In bestowing generosity and compassion, Jesus not only shows us how it's done, but breaks open our hearts and turns us around so that we can bestow generosity and compassion. But first we have to come down.

To stretch out the metaphor, we climb trees, or even build towers, to raise ourselves up, but we can only get so far up on our own power, at best, a few hundred feet. If we can bring ourselves to climb down to ground level, Jesus will take us flying, tens of thousands of feet up.

Douglas Adams' comic sci-fi series, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, holds that people have always possessed the ability to fly. The knack is to throw yourself at the ground and miss. I am not the most gullible person in the world, but when I read this I almost went out and tried it, it made so much sense.

Adams himself was a notorious agnostic, but the idea applies to Christians. You don't necessarily have to *throw* yourself down, but you do have to *come* down from the plinth that your ego has built in order to experience fully the generosity and compassion of Jesus. And when we come down, we will be borne up, as on eagles' wings.

Jesus is here today. Will we just watch him pass by like most of that crowd in Jericho, or will Jesus come and stay with us, as he did with Zacchaeus? Come down and see.