

We live in a world of isms. Everywhere you look, the media is always pointing out examples of the various types of isms that are the curse of our society. Racism is an obvious one and is sadly one which has been prevalent in the news recently following the Brexit vote a few months back, along with the political shenanigans taking place in the United States of America right now. Ageism is rife in industry: many find they are unable to move up the work ladder because of their age. Sexism is another common problem and there are more.

There are few examples, however, of heightism, a discrimination against short people. With the obvious exception of the police and the armed forces, few occupations prescribe a mandatory height before they will consider you for employment. There are few outcries against “heightist” jokes and yet without a discrimination against short people we probably wouldn’t have the gospel reading we have heard today.

Short people do have a hard time of it. I often tell people that I may not be tall but “boy, am I short!” When I go to a soccer match I always have to find a spot where I can see what’s going on. This either means being at the front or bobbing my head around so that I can see over the person sitting in front of me. This was exactly the same problem that Zacchaeus faced.

Jericho was an extremely wealthy and important town. It lay in the valley through which flowed the river Jordan and its importance was heightened because it commanded the approach to Jerusalem as well as the crossings of the Jordan which allowed travellers and merchants access to the fertile lands east of the river. There was a great palm forest there and it was world-famous for its balsam groves; the perfume from which spread for miles around. It was known as the city of palms. The historian Josephus called it both “a divine region” and “the fattest in Palestine”. Dates and balsam were taken from here by the Romans for world-wide trading. It was a very rich place in which to live.

It was also a very rich place from which to extract taxes. Jericho was one of the greatest centres of taxation in Palestine. Tax collectors in this area didn’t need to cheat in order to make a lot of money, but, as we all know, tax collectors *did* cheat to make even more. Zacchaeus was not simply a tax collector but a chief tax collector - he had reached the top of his hated profession and as such was the most hated man in the area. It’s worthwhile looking at him before we continue with the story.

Sad, is probably the best way to sum him up. He was wealthy but not happy, the reason being he had chosen a way to make money that also made him a social outcast. No wonder that when he had heard of this itinerant rabbi who actually befriended outcasts he was desperate to get a view of him - to see if Jesus had a good word for him. Although he was despised and hated by men he still grasped towards God.

He would not let anything stop him in this quest. For him to mingle with the crowds who hated him was courageous in the least. No doubt many would take the opportunity to nudge, kick or otherwise harm him as he struggled forward to get a view of Jesus. Doubtless he was bruised from head to foot by the end of the attempt and still he couldn’t see - the crowd made sure of that. Instead he climbed a tree - a short-trunked tree with wide branches - ideal for shimmying along to get a good view. Zacchaeus’ height and social standing did not make things easy for him but he was determined to get a view - this was the courage of desperation.

The next thing that stands out is the urgency with which Jesus said, “Hurry and come down; for I **must** stay at your house today.” Jesus looked at this man who was looking for Him. Jesus had a way of seeing straight to the heart. He could see the sin, but he looked beyond the fault and saw the need. He saw the potential. This little wealthy cheat could become a great man in the Kingdom of God. Despite the greed that was so apparent in Zacchaeus’ life, Jesus could see his potential for “righteousness”, which means right relationship with God and with

other people. And Jesus saw his readiness for salvation. There is nothing more urgent than salvation – hence Jesus’ impatience.

There are times when all of us doubt our worthiness. We feel we are not good enough for God’s Kingdom – that we don’t pray enough or aren’t as willing to do good deeds. Jesus looks beyond such superficial things and recognises our need and our potential. And when we take him in, we are on the road to salvation.

Jesus saw Zacchaeus and told him those remarkable words that he would dine with him tonight. This was not the first time Jesus had eaten and drank with sinners, but Zacchaeus recognised the opportunity for forgiveness that was offered him. He may have heard stories of Jesus’ teaching as to how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as we heard last week, and decided to make reparations straight away. He would give half of his goods to the poor and use the other half to make restitution for the funds he had misappropriated.

Now this went far above what he had to do. Legally, the amount he repaid was only due if the robbery had been a deliberate, violent act - Zacchaeus could legally have got away with repaying the amount that was overpaid. However, Zacchaeus was determined to do more than just make amends. He showed by his deeds that he was a changed man. Zacchaeus didn’t simply give his word that he was a changed man, but proved it then and there to everyone who was present by his actions. It isn’t simply a change of words that Christ demands but a complete change of life.

And the story ends with some of the greatest words in the Gospel. “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Some people collect stamps. Others coins, postcards or some such. I collect NASA space patches – the ones astronauts wore when they flew on the Apollo missions or shuttle. Possibly I’m as sad as Zacchaeus but I spend a long time scouring the web seeking out the patches that are missing from my collection. I seek them - they don’t seek me. And although we sometimes seek God we need to remember that he constantly seeks us. It is more wonderful than the thought that we seek salvation by our God to know that God seeks our salvation too. He *wants* to save us. And to do so he sent Jesus to seek for us all - not just those who were living in Israel and Palestine 2000 years ago, but he actively seeks us now!

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” We need to be careful by what we mean by the word lost. Years ago, I lost my wedding ring swimming in the sea – that was lost without any hope of recovery. But that is not the “lost” we are talking about here. This is more like my usual habit of having lost my glasses – I’ve put them down somewhere but I know I will eventually find them. They are not lost – merely misplaced.

In the case of Zacchaeus and us, it doesn’t mean damned or doomed but misplaced. We are people in the wrong place. Jesus came to return us to the right place. We have wandered away from God and become lost. Like Zacchaeus, we have been found by Christ and put back in our rightful place as obedient children in the household and family of God our Father in heaven.