

**Sermon: 2019/11/03 (21st Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) -
*Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; 2 Thessalonians
1:1-4,11-12; & Luke 19:1-10_BTR***

[Invite children to the front. Hold up a pair of lottery tickets.]

Do you know what these are?
(Here in my hand.)

[Wait for response.]

Right!

They are lottery tickets.

They are used for gambling.

Some adults buy these in the hope of winning lots of money.

You get them from gas-stations and such like,

and you try and guess what number-balls will fall out of a machine on TV.

You scratch off the numbers on your ticket, and then you wait.

But the chances of winning anything are very, *very* low.

Generally, buying lottery tickets is a waste of time.

Yet, on Wednesday, a man in Massachusetts won the lottery - \$1 million - for the *second* time in eighteen months: [n.1].

Imagine that!

Imagine suddenly having all that money without having to work for it! *Twice*.

I "*bet*" he was *very* pleased.

Do you think he thanked God?

I hope so!

But what about all the people that didn't win?

Because that's how the lottery works.

Lots of people buy lottery tickets, and then one person wins all the money that *they* paid.

So, how do you think that those *losers* felt?

[Wait for response.]

Right!

And do you think they thanked God for that other man winning *their* money? ...

No, probably not.

And today we hear from the prophet Habakkuk:

he witnessed both the Assyrians' destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel; *and*

the Babylonians' destruction of the southern kingdom, Judah -
He must have felt like a loser too.

(As a Jewish man.

To see his people suffering so much.

They definitely hadn't won any lottery.)

But, we hear, he *chose* to trust - have 'faith' [2:4]b - in God anyway,
that though God may tolerate some evil in the here-and-now, He has a plan to
make *all* things good *eventually*.

In other words, Habakkuk decided the right thing to do was to be *patient*; to "keep
watch," waiting for the glorious day when Jesus would come: [2:1; see also 3:18].

Let's pray:

Lord God, ..., in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

Have you ever tried sharing "the Gospel" with someone?

I certainly hope so:

Jesus commands us to do it.

It is His "*Great Commission*" to the Church;

to ..."make disciples of every nation..."

If we're not speaking about our faith in Him, then - our belief that He was incarnate
God; that He died for our sins; but that He rose again, and has opened the way
that others might find a similar, *eternal*, transformed life through Him - we're
failing in our discipleship.

But that's not what I want to talk to you about this morning - I'm *always* talking
about that:

no, to return to my question:

Have you ever tried sharing the Gospel with someone, *and they've "pushed"
back?*

Rejected it.

Resisted you.

I'm sure many of us have had this... disheartening experience.

It can *really* "grind you down."

It can be very wearing; dissuasive for continuing to do so.

But understanding *why*, exactly, non-believers decline our invitations to join us for
Sunday worship, for Sunday School, and so on, is part of the "battle."

"Knowledge is power," it is said.

Thinking something is a mystery;

thinking something is inexplicable - can really rob us of our urgency; our "drive" to
do as Christ said we ought:

We might find ourselves "papering over" our disappointment saying, mistakenly, "Well, I guess Christianity just isn't for everyone."

But I think we can rationalise - *generalise* - why it is that we encounter hostility - *defensiveness* - in others:

broadly speaking, there are *two* causes; and both can be gleaned from this morning's *Luke* passage about Zaccheus.

Zaccheus was an outsider.

He was an "outsider" because he was a 'tax collector' of the Roman Empire.

Oftentimes preachers might stress how, as such, he was likely embezzling some of his takings; de-frauding people; *over-taxing* them for his own gain.

And made himself an enemy of the general public in that way.

But we mustn't get too carried away thinking such things.

Yes, we hear he was a 'rich' man.

But then these things are relative - contextual:

to say he was 'rich' might mean merely that he had a *steady* job; a *salaried* job in a backwater, "flyover" province that was *extremely* poor by imperial standards.

Furthermore, we're told, he was the '*chief* tax collector.'

In other words, he wasn't some lowly, door-to-door, "bottom of the heap" 'tax-collector'.

A cubical-drone we might say these days.

He was the *boss* of tax-collectors! - for this region, at least.

Which means he had real responsibility.

And received the proper remuneration for such.

It is because of who he worked for that his neighbours hated and ostracised him: he represented *Caesar* - an idol-worshipping, Gentile, pagan, foreigner.

Zaccheus was, in other words, a *traitor*.

A collaborator.

A "turncoat."

He was personally helping to "prop up" Caesar's (illegitimate) colonisation of the Jewish state.

And so was *rightly* called 'a sinner'.

He certainly was that!

He was knowingly helping the Romans oppress and impoverish his own community.

Zaccheus was a disgrace.

A coward.

And yet notice how he responds to Jesus:

with excitement.

With *repentance*.

Zaccheus "comes clean."

Seeing the Gospel - embodied by the Savior, he has a change of heart about the direction his life was going and embraces a new "path."

And this is *precisely* the thing that makes him *very* unusual - by the standards of his own day and ours.

Because the *first* reason people might rebuff our suggestion that they could come to St. Matthew's is that most of us don't *want* to acknowledge our inadequacy without the Lord in our lives:

Our pride - our *ego* - would rather continue making a mess of things rather than admitting we need *external* help - help from "above;" from Heaven.

Jesus makes this very observation Himself in *John* to Nicodemus (the Sadducee): He says to him - 'For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.'

Our over-inflated self-regard, in other words, is like a cockroach: our nature is to scuttle away under the metaphorical refrigerator from uncomfortable truths about ourselves.

And to do that because what many sense about the Gospel is that *it* is predicated on an implicit criticism that we're not who we should be, and much of what we do we shouldn't.

Sensing that that might be true but afraid of making a change, some turn away and, essentially, intellectually, "put their fingers in their ears." [Pause.]

The other reason why we might struggle to win over others to following Jesus is embodied by the crowd who laughed at Zaccheus.

Unlike him, they don't invite Jesus into their homes for a feast because they didn't think that they needed to!

Like many today, they thought that they were "good enough" (just as they are) without inviting God's Son into their lives.

"Good-enough-people" are certain that *other* people are bad, sure; but they are doing just fine, thank you very much.

Why would *they* need saving?

These people genuinely can't see how they might be faulty; broken... "*fallen*" as theologians say.

And so the magnanimity of Christ coming into the world is lost on them.

But of course, we *never* hear Jesus say to *anyone*: "Oh, you don't need me. This message - the "Good News" - isn't for you. I have others in mind."

We never see Him in the New Testament going to a town, stopping up short and exclaiming: "Oops, no not this place; not these folks."

In fact, quite the reverse.

Wherever He goes is where He is needed: today, (in our readings), Jericho.

Tomorrow, Jerusalem. 2,000 years later, McMinnville, Murfreesboro and every city you can imagine:

All must be born again of water and the Spirit He said to Nicodemus, who was a

priest.

All need what I'm offering, He said.

The reluctant and obstinate most of all.

"The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

And that's all those men and women born since Eden:

To be human *is* to be lost.

And to pretend you know where you are - that you are perfectly happy living in The (morally, aesthetically mediocre) Maze you've made - the Maze we inherit, is a *terrible* tragedy - an *avoidable* tragedy.

And to allow the Lord to lead you out is worth paying *any* price - even, as Zaccheus, 'four times' what we owe.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://boston.cbslocal.com/2019/11/01/mendon-man-wins-second-1-million-lottery-prize-rolf-rhodes/>