

Proper 26

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Introduction

'Now Zacchaeus was a very little man

And a very little man was he

He climbed up into a sycamore tree

For the Saviour he wanted to see'

Today's Gospel reading presents us with the familiar story many of us know from the Sunday School song. It tells us about a small man, despised and ostracised by his local community, who climbed a tree because he wanted to see Jesus, and by so doing was saved and had his life transformed – or does it? It is indeed a story about seeing and being seen, but the hidden textures around the verb to see and the ambiguous tense of the verbs in Zaccheus' response in v.8 open up a rather different reading to the traditional one with its tacit theological narratives about repentance, forgiveness, and salvation. This in turn can help us to think about how we read conflict situations and the role which seeing plays in this.

Preparation

Find a number of objects – some familiar and some unfamiliar – and simply spend some time looking at them intently. Do you see anything which surprises you?

Text

Luke 19:1–10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Comment

The themes of sight and seeing are important threads throughout the Luke–Acts narrative: Luke places ‘recovery of sight’ as the fulcrum of his carefully constructed chiasmic rendition of Isaiah 61:1–2 (with its imported line from Is 58:6) by which Jesus announces his Messianic ministry. He then repeatedly presents us with vignettes in which Jesus is either an enabler or an object of vision; something which is, in turn, part of the Lucan project to enable his readers to see Jesus clearly and understand the implications of this.

Some of these episodes – such as that in the passage immediately preceding today’s Gospel – involve the recovery of physical sight; others – such as the one here – deal with how we ‘see’ ourselves and each other. In these instances the actions of Jesus, or the way in which he couches the story, are directed at challenging and changing ways of seeing and reading the other which disrupt and distort relational connection in various ways, and hence oppose the work of the Kingdom.

At first glance, the tale of Zaccheus may not seem to have much to do with such things; or only in so much as we might usually read it as a story where encounter

with Jesus allows someone to ‘see’ who they are, with a subsequent repentance/amendment/forgiveness/salvation chain of consequences. However seeing and being seen is actually the driving dynamic of this story – something which also becomes clearer if we look more closely at what Zaccheus himself actually says, and how this sits within the larger narrative. ‘Seeing’ appears in three places in the narrative and in each instance it introduces a critical dynamic: Firstly – and what initiates all the subsequent events – is that Zaccheus himself wants ‘to see who Jesus was’; secondly Jesus looks up and sees Zaccheus in the tree – setting in train a sequence which leads to the third instance *viz.* that when the crowd see Jesus going off with the despised tax collector, they start to grumble. This then leads directly to Zaccheus’ speech to the crowd – something which we could see as being a declaration of how *he* sees himself – and thence to Jesus’ observation that “today Salvation has come to this house”. Luke uses two different verbs for ‘see’ in this passage – *horao* and *blep* – and these add a texture which is lost in our English translation. Hence while both mean ‘to perceive’, the latter is a stronger, more vivid word indicating a much more intent, deep contemplation of the object or person being regarded. Here Zaccheus and the grumbling crowd *horao* see whereas Jesus *blep* sees. Putting this another way, we could say that Jesus really looks at Zaccheus – he sees beyond or through the perceived common narrative about him (which informs the more superficial seeing of the crowd) to see him as he *is*.

Luke has already used *blep* to powerful effect in an earlier story about seeing, in which a woman washes the feet of Jesus with her tears. She is seen – *horao* seen – by the men present as shameless and sinful, though of course they think *they* are seeing her correctly and that it is Jesus who cannot see beyond his own nose: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” (7:39). Jesus’ subsequent challenge to Simon in 7:44 is “Do you *see* – *blep* see – this woman?” Of course Simon sees her, but he has not *seen* her and Jesus proceeds to show him what looking at her properly, directly, rather than superficially through his pre-existing narrative, would have revealed to him. Similarly with Zaccheus: to the local community he is seen only through the ‘tax collector’ lens i.e as one colluding with an oppressive overlord and their systems. Likewise his interactions with others – in this case Jesus – are analysed through the same more superficial reading. Jesus on the other hand sees Zaccheus for what he is – ‘a Son of Abraham’ with whom he wants to sit and share a meal, no doubt while having a bit of a blether!

Zaccheus’ response to the grumbling also bears closer examination since the tense of the verbs he uses is ambiguous in the Greek: both here and in the NIV, the *future tense* is used and thus his statement is understood to be a declaration of what he *will* do in response to his encounter with Jesus and thus as a public demonstration of his repentance/conversion. However the verbs could equally be read as being in the present tense (as the KJV and RSV render them) – and thus Zaccheus, rather than making a declaration of intent, can be seen as making a statement of current practice – he *already* gives away half his income and compensates those whom he has (whether accidentally or deliberately) defrauded. Seen in this light we could argue that Zaccheus’ response to the grumbling onlookers is *his* attempt to get them to see and acknowledge a different reality to the one dictated by their preconceptions.

It’s interesting to note that Jesus neither condemns Zaccheus nor commands him to repent; similarly he does not commend him for his words or the actions described, he simply pronounces a blessing. But if ‘salvation has come to this house’ not because of a repentance/conversion sequence, how are we to understand it? Could it be because Zaccheus has, at last, been *seen* by his community – and thus the first steps towards a better understanding and deeper connection have been made?

So, what has this to do with our approach to conflict? If we read this story as being only/primarily about repentance and salvation then in effect we treat Zaccheus just as his own community did by pre-reading him through our own theological narratives and commitments; essentially we take a *horao* approach to looking rather than a *blep* one and thus the essential Zaccheus disappears, with all that follows on in the wake of our misconstrual of him. Similarly when we approach a conflict

situation or narrative, or encounter someone involved in these, we need to be aware of whether and to what extent our own preconceptions and commitments might be preventing us from the intent deep looking and seeing which is necessary for developing a better and deeper understanding.

Response

Think about the people and narratives in a situation of conflict in which you are involved or which you are trying to understand. What assumptions are you bringing to these readings? Could/would your understanding be any different if you weren't looking through these particular lenses? Are there any practices which you could adopt, or skills you could develop to help you deepen your looking and expand your seeing with respect to this situation?

Prayer

Jesus
help us to look more intently,
listen more acutely,
discern more clearly;
Help us love more deeply,
live more hospitably,
give more generously,
So may your kingdom come
in us and through us,

Amen