

# Twenty–First Sunday After Pentecost

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## Introduction

I often wonder if we don't need to work a bit harder to think spiritually about texts which we came to as a child and learned by heart in Sunday School.

The stories of Noah's Ark and Jonah and the Whale were always folk tales, larger than life and full of jokes and metaphors – ideal for retelling to a junior audience. But the New Testament stories that we treat in this way, the boy with the five loaves and the two fish, the prodigal son, and the story of Zacchaeus to name only three, these are complex tales, told for an adult audience, full of conflict and nuance. In simplifying them to morality tales for children we almost wipe the canvas of the detail in the picture.

Read the text of Zacchaeus today and try and pick out the details. Let it not be an exercise in blind 'colouring-in' but instead try and see the detail that makes this narrative what it is.

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## 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."

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## Comment

The colouring sheet has been a popular activity for children in church since the 1950s but was first promoted in the 1880s in the US as a method of educating children in art, with a focus on providing education in art for all, not just for wealthy elites. In this drive was also a desire for the spiritual improvement of children from poorer backgrounds and the link between colouring and good mental health was made very early in its conception. It was also regarded as important by those American educationalists and artists that drawing was a skill achievable by everyone. This universalism in the colouring movement meant that it was easily picked up for advertising, ‘the “Heinz Kindergarten Book No. 5: Pictures to Trace, Jingles to Learn,” (circa 1910) and Singer Sewing Machine Co.’s “The Singer Drawing Book for Young Artists” (circa 1900) all built brand loyalty while teaching youngsters how to draw.’

It was a short step between the marketing of baked beans and sewing machines and the evangelical desire to convert children to Christian morals and norms through colouring.

In my own childhood, the Sunday School teaching methods that I experienced included action songs, story-telling, quizzes, memory verses, craft activities, and the colouring-in sheet. It was usually the only one of these options completed weekly. A story like the one of Zacchaeus would be represented in a simple line cartoon and then a text or two written at the bottom. We were encouraged to complete these sheets during the lesson and then take them home to our parents. In an era when many children came to church unaccompanied by an adult, this had the dual purpose of teaching the child but also informing the absent parent of the key biblical message taught that week.

I remember at one weekend away for evangelical young Christians I was told that a non-Christian adult in the home was a conduit for evil in the household and needed to be converted or they would endanger my own spiritual journey and go to hell themselves. When I queried this as not being my impression of my own father, I was informed that he might be being subconsciously evil, and it was my job to waken him to the peril he was in, and to take home from church as much spiritual teaching as I could to convince him of the rightness of the faith and the error of his ways.

The conflict between the complexity of the gospels and the simplicity of the colouring sheet has never really been resolved for me. The flatness of colouring within the lines didn’t appeal, my hand-eye co-ordination was poor and the task itself did not thrill me. The added pressure of the requirement to complete the exercise to ensure all my family had entry to heaven was not conducive to enjoyment of the process. In my personal experience of junior church (and I am aware that we all engaged with this differently) colouring-in was connected to intellectual control and the flatness of the Christian worksheet was indicative of the desire of many of the adults who educated to control the manner in which I thought about the biblical material I was learning, as well as learning the material itself. Their anxiety that I came to the same conclusions as they had been schooled to believe about the faith was communicated in the choosing of worksheet tasks, set out in commercial workbooks from specified acceptable publishers, and copied on a photocopier in church.

On reflection, I feel the worksheet with its simplifying geniality operated control over young minds much more securely than the questions and answers in the catechism used on the generations above me in the protestant tradition. Regardless of that distinction, the underlying issue, for both catechism and worksheet, was the need to control the moral and social conclusions made by the child being educated in the ways of the faith. These were the steps beyond learning the biblical stories that ensured the correct social outcomes for the child, which could stretch out the text to bolster pre-selected criteria relating to church attendance, giving to charity, gender norms expressed in suitable dress codes, sexual morality, and group identity.

My personal stress trigger which is colouring-in is far from universal. In fact, as an adult, I am aware that for many people, young and old, colouring is a method of mindfulness, for calming anxiety and relaxing the soul, it could be as a meditative prayer or an act of worship in its own right. It is exactly the opposite of anxiety and negative control. This is an activity where the participant has positive control over a creative process in a way that creates beauty and enhances personal peace.

And this is where Zacchaeus takes me. Here we have a story not about money, not about being short, not about climbing trees to see Jesus: it is, rather, a story about anxiety.

Jesus entered Jericho 'and was passing through it'. This is the key pressure point, Zacchaeus feels short of time, if he's going to get to see Jesus it has to be today. There's already a big crowd, Zacchaeus is behind. He needs access. He is in that place where panic sweeps the senses and he does something a wealthy man in his position would never do – he climbs a tree. Perhaps for Zacchaeus the money itself was bound up in anxiety? Maybe he felt the need to accumulate wealth to ease his angst but he never had enough? His hoarding was a life-hack, but it wasn't working. We can't know for sure.

What we are told is that in that crowded street, Jesus picks out Zacchaeus and changes his mind about passing through. Now he is going to stay, and he's staying at the house of the wound-up miser – an unpopular decision; 'All who saw it began to grumble'.

So why did Jesus single out Zacchaeus? My colouring-in worksheet answer is that because Zacchaeus was a bad man and Jesus would make him into a good man. My current reading of the text isn't so sure.... Jesus saw a man in need, an anxious man, a man so wound up with worry and stress that his heart was pounding, his mouth was dry, he was physically unable to relieve his own anxiety. Letting go of the money, in this reading, was just a start. For Zacchaeus a lifetime of conscious letting go of the negative stress buzz to which he was addicted would be a long and possibly painful process. Perhaps, ironically, he might have benefitted from taking up colouring-in.

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## Response

In our reading today we have been thinking about anxiety and control.  
What do the words 'the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost' mean to you?  
Is this about wealth and poverty?  
Is it about giving solace to those who have fear and anxiety?  
Is it about spiritual or moral purity?  
Who do we judge to be lost?  
Can we control who is lost and who is found?

Do you feel lost?  
How would Jesus find you?  
Which tree would you climb?  
Would he single you out?  
What would you give away to rid yourself of anxiety?

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## Prayer

'Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.'

Psalm 119:105

In a crowded street of failures to control the thinking of others,  
*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*  
Show me the tree I need to climb.

Passing through a world of dark thoughts and circular thinking,  
*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*  
Stop! Give me time to colour the detail of my life through faith.

If I hoard my worries as insurance against my anxiety,  
*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*  
Cast a light on them, that I may see their worth.

If I nurture hate in my secret bank of harsh thoughts,  
*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*  
Shine a torch on the balance of my judgements.

In the scrolling doom of the grumbles of strangers,  
*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*  
Seek me, and save me.

Amen

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## Further Reading

The information, and quotation, about the history of colouring came from an article relating to a museum exhibition “Drawn to Art: Art Education and the American Experience, 1800–1950” at the Huntington in 2004.

<https://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2003/08/04/31263.html>