

A QUESTION OF STATURE

A re-imagining of Luke 19:1-10

The people of Jericho were out on the streets, jostling and elbowing each other to get a better view of the notorious miracle worker as he travelled through the city. One man, Zacchaeus, was desperate to meet this Jesus but was too short to see over the heads of the crowd. Try as he might he could not get near, and to make matters worse anyone who recognised him made a point of shoving him roughly out of the way. A superintendent of tax collectors was not the most popular man in town.

In the end Zacchaeus decided reluctantly that he would have to climb a tree that Jesus would pass by if he were to see him. He might tear his expensive robe and he would certainly be undignified, but these were sacrifices that had to be made to attain his goal. Good living had made him unfit and overweight, but eventually, puffing and sweating, he got up into the tree, and was soon rewarded by the arrival of Jesus just below him on the road. He called out to him, ‘Sir! I beg of you to hear me. I need your help!’

Jesus stopped and looked up. ‘What is it you want?’ he asked.

Zacchaeus could imagine the jeers and catcalls from the crowd if he uttered his request in their hearing. ‘Where are you staying?’ he asked. ‘I must speak with you in private.’

Jesus spread out his hands and shook his head. ‘The sons of men,’ he said, ‘do not have holes in the ground like foxes or nests in trees like birds. I have nowhere to lay my head tonight unless you offer me hospitality.’

Zacchaeus slid eagerly to the ground. ‘Then come with me, sir. Everything of mine is yours for so illustrious a guest.’

He hurriedly led Jesus from the mob down a side street, the youth of the town taking advantage of the uproar to hurl abuse at Zacchaeus, who knew well that they only stopped short of violence because Jesus was with him. When they reached his house Zacchaeus pushed Jesus inside and slammed the door shut behind them. Then he bade a servant fetch water and wash his guest’s feet, while he himself murmured obsequious words of welcome to try and soften up this great man before he made his request. Only when they had both been revived with food and wine, did Zacchaeus turn to the matter on his mind.

‘You are able to work wonders,’ he said. It was a statement of fact and before Jesus had time to say anything Zacchaeus went on quickly: ‘I have given you the best this house can offer. In return I just have this request: please make me taller.’

‘You must know,’ said Jesus, ‘that no one can add the smallest amount to anybody’s stature. Growth is not in any man’s gift. It is given, whether little or much, to each at birth and throughout life by *alaha*, the sole Parent of all the living. See how much taller you are than when you were born. You already have your request.’

Zacchaeus turned on him in fury. Had he made all that effort, wasted all that good food and his best wine, to be cheated by a charlatan? But he knew that losing his temper would be pointless, so he controlled himself. He still had another card to play. Giving Jesus a sly grin and rubbed his forefinger against his thumb, he murmured, ‘I could make it worth your while.’

In the silence that followed, Zacchaeus looked at his guest anxiously. Jesus’ face clouded with anger and he began to breathe as if he had been running a race. Zacchaeus quickly offered him a cup of wine which Jesus waved away so vehemently that Zacchaeus flinched, half afraid that his guest was about to strike him. The moment slowly passed, and when all seemed calm again, he thought it safe to explain his situation.

‘Sir,’ he began, his eyes cast down, ‘I did not mean to offend you – ’

Jesus interrupted him: ‘*I am not the One you offended, Zacchaeus.*’

He stared at Jesus uncomprehending. Then he continued: ‘You must know, sir, that Caesar grinds the faces of us poor citizens of Jericho as elsewhere, so surely you cannot think it any great crime to siphon off a little of what his grasping hands seize?’

‘A crime?’ echoed Jesus. ‘Is it not a crime to defraud your fellow citizens of what they have worked hard for?’

Zacchaeus fidgeted uncomfortably and shifted to another tactic: ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘you are a man of great stature and wisdom, and you know how all of us suffer under Roman power. I have always been the least of my family: my parents rejected me because of my size; even my sisters were taller than me and my brothers bullied me because I was so small. All my life I have been subject to insult and hatred. Is it any wonder that I fend for myself and take what I can out of life? Can you not see that my need is greater than that of others? Surely I have not done wrong to help myself a little?’

After a while he stopped and looked up, hoping for a reply, but Jesus had fallen asleep.



Next morning Zacchaeus showed his disappointing guest the door, and found to his dismay that the mob had returned and were lying in wait for them to come out. Immediately the shouting and abuse began, only this time some of the insults were aimed at Jesus too, reviling him loudly for accepting hospitality from that worst of sinners, a chief tax collector. The crowd surged forward, and the next minute someone threw a stone straight at the two men standing in the doorway. Jesus stepped smartly forward, the stone catching him a glancing blow on the arm so that it started to bleed.

‘Peace!’ he cried, holding up his hand. ‘Have you forgotten that the Law requires that strangers be given food and shelter? Who among you made me welcome last night? Now, go your way, and I shall do the same.’

For a moment Zacchaeus stood still, dumbfounded, suddenly aware that height and stature might not be the same thing. If Jesus had not moved forward that stone would have struck him in the face. This stranger had shed his blood instead of someone who was known to be a cheat and a thief. Zacchaeus darted back indoors, emerging presently with several heavy pouches just as the people were beginning to disperse.

‘Wait!’ Zacchaeus called out, pulling open the bags in his hands. ‘Wait! I have something to throw, too!’

The crowd was startled, but as the missiles began to fly they ran forward again to pick up the coins as they fell to the road – more and more, until the air seemed thick with metal rain and the people were laughing and cheering as they never had before.

‘Take that!’ shouted Zacchaeus, laughing himself as he chucked the contents of the last bag away from him, and with it all his shame and guilt. ‘It’s all yours! There you are, three, no, four times what I ever owed anybody! It’s not mine and I don’t need it any more!’

Then as he walked back into his house, his head held high, to his astonishment, he felt it just touch the lintel of the door as he passed underneath.

