

He too is a son of Abraham

These words must have been difficult for those in the crowd to hear. He too is a son of Abraham.

And these were difficult words for me too...Isn't it true that we see things according to where we stand...our experiences, our background and our prejudices.

Two years ago I attended a week-long placement at Wayland Prison. The prison is set in the countryside just outside the village of Griston in Norfolk. Just beyond the beauty of the greenery and lush trees down a lonely country road lies this category C adult male training prison. Two of its eight residential units are separated from the main prison by a large fence and these two residential units are designated for those taking part in its Sex Offender Treatment Programmes. It was a difficult placement for me, because I saw a sexual offence as possibly the worse kind of violation. This type of crime in particular not only violates other human beings and destroys relationships, but it injures in ways that to me seem unimaginable, and sometimes the offences are committed in the most brutal ways. How, I wondered, could anything be salvaged and restored from an experience like that?

One of the programmes offered at Wayland is called the Sycamore Tree course in Restorative Justice. The programme is run by the chaplains at Wayland and is based on the story of Zacchaeus in Luke's Gospel. As you heard earlier Zacchaeus, a tax collector was considered an offender by many of the Jews in the Gospel account.

First Century Jews hated the Roman occupation of their land and so for the Jewish crowd Zacchaeus as a tax collector was seen as a Roman collaborator. He was seen as someone who got rich from violating others and taking what little they had. He was a total outcast, Zaccheaus was the outsider, the offender, the one lost in the wilderness alone in the crowd.

According to the Sycamore Tree programme offered at Wayland, Jesus gives Zacchaeus the opportunity to restore the damage he had done.

Here is this rich man in a gospel that seems to speak mostly in defence of the poor. It is a gospel about the Christ who has come to bring good news to the poor. But it is actually more than that it is a gospel that speaks of Christ who came to all people. The Christ of compassion and love who embraces the outcast and the righteous.

Zacchaeus must have wondered, if anything could be salvaged and restored for him and his family from their terrible experiences as outcasts in Jericho. He like everyone else heard that Jesus was passing through Jericho.

Now as this is reformation Sunday I decided to see what Calvin had to say about Zacchaeus, and according to Calvin Zacchaeus so wanted to see Christ that he climbed a tree when rich men are usually proud and want to appear serious. Calvin believed that Zacchaeus must have been moved by God to desire so much to see Christ - empty curiosity moved some to see Christ even from a distance. But from what happened in the story it was clear to Calvin that there was a seed of godliness in Zacchaeus' mind.

So Zacchaeus made an effort to put himself in a position to see. He was short in stature but he decided to seek a vantage point. He climbed a sycamore tree he changed his view... Isn't it true that we see things according to where we stand...our experiences, our background and our prejudices. But I wonder did Zacchaeus need to change his view or did the crowd? Or both?

In an orientation session at Wayland to demonstrate the idea of restorative justice, I was extremely shocked when the chaplain smashed what seemed to be a perfectly beautiful vase and then asked my colleagues and me to put it back together again. We were expected to gather all the bits and to clean up the mess. He made it clear that he wanted it back to its original beauty. That was certainly not an easy task. He used the vase to lead us into discussing restorative justice, and the procedures they have adopted to help offenders take personal responsibility for their crimes and their attempts to negotiate some form of restitution.

What I saw vividly in this, is that it is not always possible to put broken things together again. But this was not new I had seen broken things before, but what was new was that even as the vase appeared weakened and I saw in his demonstration the difficulty that

faced all involved, from the victim and the offender, to their families and the chaplains. There was something new...it does not matter how uncomfortable or difficult some things appear, if we are sincere and honest in our offerings we have opened a way to a new beginning. And this is what the writer of Isaiah is alluding to.

I can certainly identify with the crowd and their disapproval and discomfort with Jesus inviting himself to stay at Zacchaeus' house. I found myself uncomfortable with the way the sex offenders appeared to be like 'normal' people, and in retrospect I felt guilty. There was a part of me that couldn't imagine sex offenders as people too, just as the crowd could not imagine Zacchaeus as a person like them, with a story and a voice. What about the victims who are also people with a story and a voice, what about the crowd and all those affected by Zacchaeus' tax collection.

I found that because of how I saw the offenders, there was a definite tension between my seeking to proclaim God's love, forgiveness, reconciliation and life to all people.

But the intent to affect restoration was no where more evident to me than at the Sunday chapel service for the sex offenders at Wayland. While we were there, praying, singing and participating in fellowship. My focus was no longer on what the offenders might have done, but on what Christ has done. I heard in their voices, as one man read one of his poems and another sang an original song, words of remorse and the longing to make amends. They spoke about seeing the pain, and spreading the compassion of Christ, about being set free through God's love from those things that kept them captive.

And so there was a a general murmur of disapproval as Zacchaeus gladly welcomed Jesus to his house. 'He has gone in to be the guest of a sinner' they said, But Zacchaeus stood up and spoke up and his words spoke of exactly what Jesus had commanded and what we heard of Isaiah in our reading Our reading from Isaiah urges us to restoration and reformation it talks about finding our way back to God through relationships built on justice Isaiah 1 Verse 17 reads Learn to do good, pursue Justice guide the oppressed uphold the rights of the fatherless and plead the widows case.

In other words the way back to God is to repair those social relations of justice to reorient our lives to climb up to a new vantage point and see those issues from a new and fresh stand point.

Emmanuel TS 31/10/10 Luke 19:1-10; Isaiah 1:10-18

'Here and now sir Zacchaeus says I give half my possessions to charity; and if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay him four times over'

Today salvation has come to this house Jesus proclaims
This house that was lost in the wilderness the son of man sought and saved
But the crowd too was lost, blinded by Zacchaeus' position and office unable to see beyond that to the man he really was.

A man who shared his wealth with those less fortunate. A man willing to repay four times any wrong he may have done.

So the crowd too was lost and for them too the son of man sought and saved, he was able to make the crowd see Zacchaeus for who he was, and who he was, was one of them, a person with a voice and a story, just like them, a son of Abraham, not only because he was a Jew, but because of his faith too.

This man too is a son of Abraham
...Isn't it true that we see things according to where we stand...our experiences, our background and our prejudices.

It is only when we allow ourselves to see beyond our experiences, beyond our background, beyond our prejudices and beyond where we stand. That we see what was lost and find that the son of man has come to proclaim us all daughters and sons of Abraham.