

## **Integral Mission in the Ministry of Jesus: Luke 7:36-50 and 19:1-10<sup>1</sup>**

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The two encounters with Jesus in Luke 7:36-50 and 19:1-10 might not seem on the surface have much to do with integral mission, justice or indeed with each other. But on closer examination the issues are very pertinent. The two people, a man and a woman, are different. But they have some things in common. Neither of them suffers obvious financial hardship, but they are nevertheless part of the marginalized people of Jewish culture. They are both despised by the upright; both rejected by the religious mainstream. And they both become at the centre of issues of hospitality.

### **Luke 19:1-10**

The story of Zacchaeus is one which we still like to tell to children. Yet its context and implications are anything but child-like. The context is the Roman occupation of Israel. The Jews are suffering not only the indignity of having their independence denied and their authority usurped; they are also obliged to pay for the privilege. The burden of taxation is clearly heavy, and made much worse by the fact that the tax collectors are most often Jews themselves who make a substantial livelihood by colluding with the occupiers. Zacchaeus is hated by his fellows. He is rich because he is paid well, but rich also because he is corrupt. He cheerfully takes his cut out of the pockets of those whose taxes he handles. And why not? The Romans are not going to worry unduly, and the whole system is unjust anyway. What does it matter if he cashes in and lines his pocket? It is adding only a little more to the exploitation and it brings him great rewards.

So it is not surprising that, when he joins the crowd to see Jesus passing by, no-one bothers to let him through. Being short, he might have been given this courtesy if he had friends around. But instead, he has to climb a tree to satisfy his curiosity. Not very dignified we might think, but Zacchaeus seems, long since, to have let go of dignity or decorum. What follows is, of course, entirely unpredictable. Jesus, also unbothered about protocol, calls into the tree and invites himself to the tax collector's home.

Zacchaeus has rarely had the opportunity to offer hospitality. He is rich but has few friends; rich but impoverished relationally. So it is perhaps not surprising that Jesus takes the initiative here. He does not wait to be asked for he is not going to be asked. Whatever the pleasures of Zacchaeus' wealth, they do little to bring him the confidence to invite someone home. What could possibly justify him in expecting others to receive hospitality from him?

Giving and receiving hospitality is close to the heart of Jewish society. Receiving hospitality is a mark of acceptance. And a true offer of hospitality is inevitably accompanied by vulnerability. It is not the natural domain of the rich.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper also appears in *Justice, Mercy and Humility*, ed. Tim Chester, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003)

In fact, Henri Nouwen perceptively shows us the link between poverty and hospitality.

It is the paradox of hospitality that poverty makes a good host. Poverty is the inner disposition that allows us to take away our defences and convert our enemies into friends. We can only perceive the stranger as an enemy as long as we have something to defend. But when we say, 'Please enter – my house is your house, my joy is your joy, my sadness is your sadness and my life is your life' we have nothing to defend since we have nothing to lose but all to give.<sup>2</sup>

I experienced something of this myself when visiting Mexico City and being received by the Armonia community. Although our hosts were indeed poor, we were overwhelmed by generosity. More than that, we were made to feel it was their privilege to receive us, to meet our needs of food and drink, and spend scarce resources on our behalf. We, who were rich, received from the poor and were grateful.

And here, Zacchaeus is asked to give to Jesus. He can hardly believe his ears. I imagine he must have almost fallen out from the tree. The text itself leaves us in no doubt that he hurried down to welcome Jesus.

## **Two responses**

In the aftermath of Jesus' act of inviting himself two things happen. The first is that the good, upstanding religious people begin to grumble. It is appalling that Jesus is about to go and 'be the guest of a sinner.' Is he not aware that this man is an extortioner who looted the poor on behalf of the hated Roman occupiers? The second is that Zacchaeus makes an immediate and totally uncharacteristic response. 'Half my possessions I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone I will pay them back four times as much.'

If this were not said in public, with many of those he had no doubt defrauded within earshot, we would find it hard to believe he could mean it. But with so many witnesses he clearly does not intend this to be an idle promise. So what has brought about this extraordinary and overwhelming response? It is that the very act of acceptance from Jesus put him under conviction, and made him face his life, his past, his collusion with injustice, his disregard for the poor, his part in the whole corrupt system. And in one electric encounter he gives it all up. In fact this is to have permanent consequences for Zacchaeus. His wealth will disappear as he gives away half of all he owns and recompenses four times over those he has swindled in his years of cheating. The crowd must have been gasping as they worked out the level of refund they might expect.

It is interesting that Zacchaeus' response turns towards his responsibility for the poor. Jesus' move towards him does not convict him that he has not been to the synagogue lately, or that he has failed to properly observe the High

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Fount, 1980), 103.

Days and Holy Days. He is not showing great remorse for the fact that he has not tithed his mint, or recited the daily prayers. His mind goes immediately to the heart of what is wrong: that he has shown injustice towards the poor and has cheated his neighbours of what was rightly theirs. It is these sins he must now remedy.

It is interesting too that Jesus does not rebuke him. He offers no sermon about the law, no judgement about attitudes, no condemnation for the past and no warning about the future. Instead, his response strikes at the very core of our evangelical hearts. 'Today, salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.' And, surely, this extraordinary comment needs some examination. For why does Jesus refer to this as 'salvation'? Zacchaeus has made no confession of faith in the saving power of Christ. He has simply declared that he will give half of what he owns to the poor.

This has led some people to pit Jesus against Paul, and to argue that although Paul talks of free grace, Jesus implies we must work for our salvation. Here is an example: this man has earned salvation through his promise of recompense and his good deeds to come. This dichotomy, however, is totally unfounded. Redemption through works is certainly not what Jesus is suggesting. He is pointing to Zacchaeus' declaration as the truest indication of repentance and faith. For this kind of response speaks more loudly than any creed. Far more than a mere statement of belief, it is the sign of a changed heart, the sign of an encounter with God which results in totally uncharacteristic action. To renounce easy cheating in an unjust system, and a new love for the poor, is a mark of true grace

### **Luke 7:36-50**

In this second story, hospitality occurs at the beginning, not at the end. Jesus has been invited to the home of a leading Pharisee to eat with his other guests. As would be normal at that time, the meal was eaten, probably in a courtyard, in full view of passers-by and of the local people who would be interested in watching the great and the good. Barely is the meal underway when a woman bursts in. She may have been watching the proceedings up to this point, but now she rushes to the table where Jesus is reclining, and begins to pay him very special attention. Weeping, she bathes his feet with her tears, strokes and kisses them, pours an expensive bottle of perfume over them, and lets down her hair to wipe them dry. There is consternation from the onlookers and the guests who mutter among themselves. But that is probably nothing compared to the horror experienced by the host at the scandalous demonstration which is ruining his dinner party.

I confess to having some sympathy with Simon the Pharisee. And if we were to transpose this into a contemporary context, the incident would lose nothing of its outrage. If a local church leader, a leading pastor or a bishop were to be paid this kind of attention by a professional prostitute we might feel justified in wondering how he normally spent his time in the evening. Another challenge to Jesus' credentials certainly does not go unstated. Those at the table ask

themselves – and probably each other – ‘Wouldn’t this man, if he were really a prophet, actually know what kind of woman this was?’ The implication is clear. If Jesus were the kind of person he was made out to be, he would certainly not tolerate this kind of physical touching and sensual behaviour, and would have got rid of the woman immediately.

Jesus’ reply is to tell a story: a story of the cancellation of debt. It would be a familiar one. The principle of the cancellation of debt is one that they knew about. It was neither radical nor reckless in the way that many people think of it today. It was one deep in the Mosaic Law, and in the economy of the people of Israel, and a principle which people believed in even if they did not practice it with great enthusiasm. It is significant that Jesus uses an economic principle to highlight a spiritual one. For us, it is usually the other way round. The story is used to demonstrate how those who owe much have more to be grateful about than those who owe less when both their debts are cancelled. Those who are forgiven much love much, and those who are forgiven little, love little. Of course, there is irony in the point. For some are forgiven little because they do not realize how much in debt they are and do not seek its cancellation.

The story has a sting in its tail, however. For, to show the extent of the woman’s gratitude, Jesus compares her gesture of love and hospitality with that shown by his host. In every way it has greatly exceeded it. The host did not greet his guest with a kiss, did not offer him water for his feet, and did not provide a towel to dry them. In fact, the reception given to Jesus was exceedingly poor. But the woman gave her own tears, her kisses and even her hair to care for his needs. Consequently, she has demonstrated in all that she has done, the quality of the forgiveness which lives in her heart. When debt is fully acknowledged and fully cancelled, love and gratitude are the overwhelming responses. And to drive the point home, Jesus receives the woman’s attentions in front of everyone and tells her that her sins are forgiven.

### **Interpreting the response**

For me one interesting question is why the woman reacted the way she did. For gratitude towards someone does not have to be expressed in such an overt and public manner. Three answers occur to me. First, she may have been deliberately compensating for the lack of hospitality that Jesus received. As she watched the various welcomes to the table she would have noticed that he was not given the respect and honour that a guest might have expected. They were going through the motions of welcome and acceptance, but there was no heart there. She could well have detected in the disregard shown towards him an indication of their deep disrespect.

But second, she may well have recognized in Jesus something of her own situation, for, like her, he was someone rejected. Like her, he was wanted for what he could bring others, sought for what he had and could give. Jesus was a novelty. He performed miracles. He attracted crowds. Having him at the table brought reflected status and honour and this was what Simon enjoyed. In a similar way, the woman was used to being wanted for what she could

give. She met people's sexual needs. She could give them pleasure. She was used to people taking her body and her sexuality, but for themselves. They wanted something from her, but they did not want her. Here, she could see that Jesus was in the same position, and recognized in his humiliation her own story as both a commodity and an outcast. In her very act of weeping and kissing she owned the comparison and identified herself with him.

A third interpretation also offers itself. It is that, like Zacchaeus, this woman was making a public renunciation of her own past for she was bringing to Jesus her trade. She was doing what she might have done to so many men in order to arouse and stimulate them into sexual enjoyment. In touching Jesus, putting her flesh close to his flesh, kissing his feet and letting down her hair, she was using all her familiar services. Even the opening of the box of perfume could have had little ambiguity to the people round the table for prostitutes always used perfume for the erotic arousal of their most valued clients. Yet this act was different. The woman was bringing all her past, her background, her life, her brokenness and leaving it with Jesus. It was not an erotic prelude to paid sex, but an unbridled act of the purity of love, of open hospitality. In one gesture, she was giving up to this man who had cancelled her debt everything that had gone along with the life she once lived. And his response was to accept what she brought, to receive her love for what it was, and to sing her praises before the self-righteous. More than any other reactions, these must have sent her out rejoicing into the future.

## **Summary**

These two encounters with Jesus give us a deep insight into issues of mercy and justice. They tell us that people are not commodities, and yet that there are contexts where anyone can be used, demeaned and robbed of their self-respect. The people in these encounters are real people. And their reactions to Jesus are integrated reactions, not pious statements. They show, in ways which are utterly appropriate to them, what the welcome of Jesus means to them and the truth of their changed lives: justice to the poor, fair dealings with the weak, cancellation of debt, empathy with the rejected and love in action. In ways belonging intrinsically to their own stories, they bring the brokenness, pain, mistakes and sludge of past life and give it to Jesus. Here there is no hiding, no pretence and no whispering in the darkness. Instead, everything is revealed and shouted from the housetops as their lives encounter the power of love in the living God.

Jesus treats what they bring not with contempt but respect; not with rebuke but with joy; not with scorn but with warmth and acceptance. For here is safety and here is peace. Here, too, is justice and the kingdom of God.

