Where is Zacchaeus Today?

Most of us have heard the story, apocryphal or not, of a subway sign saying “Jesus is the answer”, under which someone had written: “But what is the question?” To be a Christian is not to be someone who has all the right answers. Rather, the true disciple of Jesus is someone who searches and questions, someone who never abandons the path of seeking and asking.
Jesus did not say “I am the answer to your questions”. Rather, he stated, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6), promising to walk with us on life’s journey. Jesus is not an answer to a problem, but an invitation to embrace the mystery – the mystery of our own personhood, the mystery of life, and the mystery of the living God who is beyond all words.

If we choose to follow Jesus, there is much we can learn from the Gospel story of Zacchaeus. Sometimes called the “Gospel in miniature”, the Zacchaeus story has inspired Christian thinkers and artists throughout the centuries. First and foremost, it establishes the focus of Jesus’ mission in reaching out to those on the margins, those Jesus refers to as the “lost sheep”.

Secondly, it highlights the way Jesus addresses Zacchaeus and us all by name with the words: “Come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house tonight”. Here we are invited to open our hearts to receive Jesus in our midst. It is this personal relationship with Jesus – “welcoming him joyfully” – that is the centre-point of our Christian faith and discipleship.

Thirdly, we do well to recognise there are many Zacchaeuses in our world today who have much to teach us. These are people on the fringes of faith, people who may call themselves agnostics or even atheists, but who continue to search, doubt and question. Even without knowing it, they are genuinely religious seekers. Moreover, they remind us that too many religious people, like the scribes and pharisees of Jesus’ time, are so full of their own certainties and ‘holier-than-thou’ attitudes, they cannot but fail to hear the truly liberating message of Jesus and his Gospel.

Finally, let us recognise the Zacchaeus who lives within each of us. While few of us can lay claim to being wealthy Roman tax-collectors, we all fall ‘short’ of being true disciples of Jesus. Like Zacchaeus, we often prefer to keep Jesus at a ‘distance’ lest we too are challenged to change our lives, attitudes and behaviours. Many Christians are more “fellow travellers” of Christianity than genuine disciples.

Pope Francis has noted the Zacchaeus syndrome at work in people who don’t feel ‘big’ or worthy enough, whose sense of shame causes spiritual paralysis, and who are offset by the cynicism of others. But he then notes that Zacchaeus took a risk, “ran ahead”, “climbed” the tree and, when Jesus called, “hurried down”. We too are called to put our own lives on the line by accepting Jesus’ invitation to enter our house and life.
“Where your treasure is, your heart will be too”

Jesus’ parable of an approaching wedding feast, an absent master, and good and bad servants might at first appear to us somewhat arcane, or at least culturally specific to a very different world to the one in which we live. We need, therefore, to ask a deeper question, namely, what is Jesus trying to tell us by this story?

At one level the parable may seem to be saying to us to be on our guard, watchful and alert, as we don’t know what calamity awaits us around the corner! However, Jesus begins his discourse with just the opposite piece of advice: "There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom!"
So, Jesus is not directing us to fear the future, but inviting us to live in
the present with the right attitude, acknowledging the gifts we have been
given, and setting our hearts on a life of service: “sell your possessions
and give alms”. This is the truly counter-cultural challenge that Jesus
presents to us today: don’t live your life to gain wealth for yourselves, but
live it to serve others in love. This is the life of the kingdom or “reign of
God”.

Jesus reminds us: "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”.
If our major life-focus is the gaining of wealth, power or prestige, then we
have every reason to be afraid lest misfortune makes us poor, powerless
and unimportant in the eyes of the world. However, if our life is primarily
directed towards loving service of others, we have nothing to fear, as we
are already living the life of the kingdom.

Another perspective on today’s Gospel is given to us in the first reading
from the Book of Wisdom where the Israelites celebrate the original
Passover when God heard the cries of the people and delivered them from
their enemies. Rather than focus on the future which is beyond our
control, we are invited to remember and re-enact all that God has already
done and continues to do for us.

In fact, the Eucharist is itself a re-enactment of Jesus’ Last Supper and
offering of his Body on Calvary in order that we may live. The Greek word
for Eucharist actually means Thanksgiving. Every time we celebrate the
Eucharist we remember and re-enact what God has given to us in the life,
death and resurrection of Jesus. In the words of the poet T. S. Eliot: "This
is the use of memory – for liberation”!

To return to the master-servant language in Jesus’ parable, there is in
here an implicit critique of what Pope Francis has called "the sin of
clericalism”. He reminds us that all Christians, including priests and other
clerics, are called to belong to “God’s faithful people as servants, not the
master”! There is but one master, Jesus the Christ, who in giving his life
for us also demonstrates that all genuine leadership is servant-leadership.
At the centre of Christian faith is the great paradox: God is one, yet God is three. Our tradition also speaks of God as “three persons – Father, Son and Spirit”. But how do we know this? We know this because of the witness of Jesus’ own life and the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus’ promises his disciples. Pentecost day is the celebration of that promise when the disciples are “filled with the Holy Spirit” who upturns their lives transforming them into teachers, preachers, evangelists and missionaries. This is the day the Church begins its missionary outreach to proclaim the “marvels of God” to all the world.

The testimony of St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles strains to explain this experience of the Holy Spirit in words. We are given images of a mighty wind, tongues of fire, and the disciples speaking to people from every known land in their own language! However else we imagine this, it is in the words of a 5th century Syrian monk, Pseudo-Dionysius, a mystical experience. This same monk gave us the image of the trinitarian “dancing God” of dynamic light, dazzling darkness, gift, excess, silence and
transcendence who brings humanity and the whole creation into being to display the divine glory.

Certainly, we cannot speak of the Holy Spirit as independent of the Father and the Son; nor should we speak of any ‘person’ of the Trinity in isolation. A 12th century monk, Richard of St Victor, spoke of the triune God as a loving wave originating in the Father, ebbing and flowing in the Son, to be then spread with joy through the Holy Spirit. Richard’s teacher and fellow-monk, Hugh of St Victor, spoke of the “three eyes of knowing”: bodily sensation; rational thought; spiritual awakening. It is this third form of knowing – whether we call it mystical awareness or spiritual awakening – that is the gift of the Spirit.

Too often our culture is inclined to dismiss the “spirit world” as a place of magic, sorcery and the occult. This is a danger if we isolate spiritual knowledge and mystical awareness from the loving embrace of Father, Son and Spirit. Our Christian vocation is to be “Spirit-filled” people who rely not on our own resources but on the power of the living God in our midst to transform the world. The Spirit brings insight, compassion, comfort and joy to our lives, not by turning our backs on suffering and evil, but through the celebration of the liberating presence and revolutionary promises of God to redeem the world.

To appreciate this gift of faith is to be a mystic – and to live this faith is to be missionary. Pentecost was not a one-off event. Rather, Pentecost is the ongoing experience of the movement of the Holy Spirit in our world calling us to the ever-deepening, always surprising, realisation that God is with us, God is in us, and God works through us. And so, we pray: “Come Holy Spirit”.
The Scapegoat Syndrome

Jesus confronts a very human reality, namely, the tendency to notice the failings of others while being blind to our own: “Why do you observe the splinter in your brother’s eye and never notice the plank in your own?” The solution is also clearly stated by Jesus: “Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take out the splinter in your brother’s eye!”

This is related to what is sometimes called the “scapegoat syndrome”, that is the even more insidious way humans place all responsibility for the world’s ills onto others without taking any personal responsibility. On a global scale this is expressed in terms of racism whether directed to Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Africans, Asians, Indigenous people or others. The anti-Semitic attitudes of Nazis (and neo-Nazis) is a particular case in point resulting, as we know, with the extermination of millions of Jews.

The scapegoat syndrome is also alive and well in the theatre of Australian politics: it is always the ‘other’ political party rather than one’s own that is attempting to destroy the Australian economy, ignore people’s real needs
and, if in government, will surely destroy our entire Australian way-of-life! Scapegoat rhetoric is alive and well in Question Time in our parliaments.

The scapegoating technique also works well in families, offices and market-place – just about anywhere human beings find themselves! When things go wrong, how quick we can be to name the ‘other’ the culprit rather than admit our own actions, attitudes and behaviours might have something to do with the negative state of affairs. This is not to deny the reality that, sometimes, other people are to blame. But today Jesus is having us focus on the many more times we judge others while being blind to our own failings.

Significant among Jesus’ miracles is the healing of blindness. Mark’s account of Jesus’ curing the blind man at Bethsaida is revealing in the way the process takes time. At first, the blind man sees, but only partially: “I see men walking around like trees”. It is only when Jesus touches his eyes again the man sees everything clearly [Mark 8: 22-26]. Curing spiritual blindness is also a process that takes time, effort and God’s grace.

Yet, as with any disease, we must recognise the condition and want to be healed. There are still too many Australians refusing to admit our political policies and human attitudes to migrants and refugees are, in part, scapegoating mechanisms. We also have to reckon with our history which advocated a “White Australia Policy” and treated our Indigenous peoples so poorly. We must stop the blame-game if we are to move towards genuine reconciliation and human goodness.

Jesus’ other statement about the sound tree producing good fruit, and the rotten tree bad fruit, is compelling. We are called to ongoing conversion if we are to be cured of our own blindness and open our hearts to people who are ‘other’ and ‘different’ to ourselves.
They Have No Wine!

Of all Jesus’ miracles, we might think his turning water into wine is the least significant. However, for John, this miracle at the wedding feast of Cana takes pride of place as the first of the ‘signs’ given by Jesus. Other ‘signs’ in John’s Gospel include healing miracles, feeding the 5,000, Jesus’ walking on water, and his raising Lazarus from the dead. While John acknowledges there were “many other signs”, he chooses these seven ‘signs’ so “you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (Jn. 20:30).

Each of these miracle-signs of Jesus is a foretaste of the single, great miracle of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. So, what lessons can we draw from the wedding feast of Cana? First, let us note this is the only recorded miracle of Jesus performed for friends and family. Elsewhere, he seems to dismiss any special significance for family: “Whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mtt. 12:50). On another occasion, when returning to Nazareth, we are told Jesus was so “amazed by their lack of faith ... he could work no miracles there” (Mk 6:5f.).
Second, there is the extraordinary interchange between Jesus and his mother, Mary. It is Mary who confronts her son with the problem: “They have no wine!” We need to note, at this point, Jesus had not given any indication of special powers. Next, we cannot help but notice Jesus’ annoyance in stating his time had not yet come. But Mary, unperturbed, tells the waiter: “Do whatever he tells you”. We know the rest of the story: Jesus not only turns water into wine, but it is the best possible wine, as the steward acknowledges.

The human dimension of this story is compelling. Jesus and his disciples know how to celebrate life. No doubt they told yarns, sang songs and danced well into the night. Yes, the time would come when they would face crisis and be asked to lay down their very lives. Interestingly, the next time we hear of Mary in John’s Gospel is at Jesus’ Crucifixion. Just as Mary is present to witness the beginning of Jesus’ public life at Cana, she is also there to witness what is, for John, the birth of the Church at Calvary.

We are similarly living in a time of transition – what Pope Francis calls a “change of era” – when the old wine seems to be running out. Like Mary, we are being asked to place our vulnerable trust in Jesus who, with the gift of the Spirit, is the new wine for our age. Like the first disciples and early Christians, we know we live in a time of human, political, even planetary crisis that also embroils society and church. We can only but trust in God who alone is able to turn the water of our fears into the new wine of God’s creative presence and enduring love.
Imagine the scene. Jesus and his disciples are making their way along the road to Capernaum. Being a few paces away from the others, Jesus is not part of their conversation. Nonetheless he picks up the vibe: the disciples are squabbling among themselves. So, when they arrive at their destination, Jesus confronts them: “What were you arguing about along the road?” Attempting to cover their shame, the disciples say nothing.

Before advancing the story, let us put it in context. Just a few days earlier, Jesus had taken Peter, James and John to Mt Tabor, some thirty miles from Capernaum, where he was shown in all his glory. Then, on the way down the mountain, they came across a boy possessed by an unclean spirit. The disciples try unsuccessfully to heal the boy. Jesus says “bring him to me”, and the boy is healed. The disciples reaction: “Why could not we heal the boy”? Their concern is not with the boy, but with their own power.
Moreover, on the mountain and along the road, Jesus has been telling the disciples that the Son of Man was to suffer and die, but after three days would rise again. Understandably, too many things are being said and done by Jesus. The disciples are confounded, confused. Their response is to fear Jesus: “They did not understand what he said and were too afraid to ask”. So, what do they do? They start debating about which one of them is the greatest!

We can picture the scene. Peter argues he has been appointed leader of the group. John announces his special intimacy with Jesus. His brother, James, known for his fiery temperament, portrays himself as the most courageous. Philip reminds them it was he Jesus first approaches about feeding the five thousand. But, says Andrew, it was me who found the boy with five barley loaves and two fish without which there would be no miracle. Judas harangues them all: without financial planning (his special gift), the discipleship mission would collapse.

At this point, Jesus has had enough. And so he calls the Twelve to him and says simply: “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last and servant of all”. Although the disciples should immediately relate this to Jesus’ earlier teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, he knows all too well people with ears so often cannot hear! So Jesus, ever the true teacher, takes a little child, symbol of vulnerability, telling them they too must become like “little children” if they are to learn true discipleship.

We are not told how the disciples reacted. Hopefully, they began to realise the question of “who is the greatest” is very much the wrong question. The questions we need to ask are: how can I become like a little child; how can I best learn to serve others; how can I put my ego aside in order to be an instrument of God’s love for others in our world?
Shepherds & Banquets

Two common images presented to us in the Scriptures are those of shepherds and banquets. First and foremost, God shepherds his people Israel by caring for them like sheep, keeping them from danger, and preparing a banquet for them. Many key biblical figures were originally shepherds such as the prophets Moses and Amos, patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, and it was the young shepherd, David, whom God called to be king of his people Israel. Moreover, it was this same King David who wrote today’s wonderful psalm acclaiming “The Lord is my shepherd”.

Unfortunately, the rulers of Israel ceased to act like shepherds turning, instead, to idolatry and causing all kinds of hostility among the different tribes. Eventually, this led to the annihilation of Israel by the Assyrians and the captivity of the people of Judah by the Babylonians. The prophet Micah laments that he saw “Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd” (I Kings 22:17). Today, we hear God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah pronouncing “doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered” (Jer. 23:1).

Two further promises are made: God will punish the misdeeds of the unfaithful leaders who do not act like shepherds; and God will bring back the scattered flock under the guidance of new shepherds who will feed
and care for them (Jer. 23:3-4). Later on, God goes a step further announcing He will shepherd Israel by “gathering the lambs in his arms and carrying them close to his heart” (Isaiah 40:11).

It is Jesus who most perfectly enacts this prophecy of the shepherd-leader through his ministry of teaching and healing, his call to discipleship and communion, sharing bread with the hungry, dining with sinners and, eventually, being the “Good Shepherd (who) lays down his life for his sheep” (Jn. 10:11). So Jesus the Good Shepherd is also “the Lamb of God” giving his very life that we may live.

Much of Jesus’ ministry is expressed through parables and events that emphasise table-fellowship: God’s reign is likened to a great banquet where all are invited; Jesus feeds the five-thousand through the miracle of loaves and fish; the Prodigal Son is greeted on return with a mighty feast. We also know that Jesus farewells his disciples at the Last Supper providing them and us with a ritual of remembrance and thanksgiving we re-enact every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

Pope Francis consistently speaks of Christ the Good Shepherd as the model of Christian service and leadership. In particular he calls on priests and pastors to be “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep”. Alas, we are fully aware of human frailty in the history of Israel and our own Church. Here we need to heed St Paul who warned the Christians of his day to overcome division and hostility, repent of sinfulness, and receive the Good News of grace and peace. All Christians are called to be shepherds of God’s mercy.
Today we celebrate the beginning of the most solemn week of our Christian calendar. Those outside our Christian faith might well accuse us of glorifying torture and death as we follow the story of Jesus’ trial, passion and crucifixion. However, we do not follow that story as mere observers of yet another incident of human cruelty. Rather, our participation in the church’s liturgy enables us to identify with Jesus in his sufferings in order that we may also share with him the fruits of the resurrection.
This time of Holy Week puts us in touch with the most profound human questions. Why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? Why do we need to die? How is it somehow God’s will that the Son Jesus should die in such excruciating circumstances? In what way is this death of Jesus the source of our life and salvation?

We need to begin by simply recognising the reality of violence that destroys people’s lives. We can all too easily see this in others – those responsible for human trafficking, death camps, terrorist killings, ethnic cleansing, environmental destruction and the greed-filled corruption of too many in power. Jesus and the prophets speak out against this reign of terror which continues to take hold of our world.

However, following Jesus to Calvary puts us in touch with another reality: none of us can escape the accusation we too play our part in destructive patterns of human behaviour. As Jesus stated to the marauding crowds who were ready to stone the woman accused of adultery: “Let the one without sin cast the first stone”. Reflecting on Jesus’ passion, we are invited to recognise our own sinfulness. Unlike Jesus, none of us is the innocent victim. We too can play the scapegoat game which puts all the blame onto others. We should also recognise ourselves in the disciples whose fear and cowardice leave Jesus to suffer and die without their support. How often have we failed to respond to a brother or sister in need?

The crucifixion of Jesus is not willed by God as a kind of payment for sin and evil. Rather, it invites us to recognise the power of evil is so great it will not stop at the killing of the Son of God himself. It also shows us that God’s healing forgiveness and liberating love have no bounds since, in Christ Jesus, God has “emptied himself, taking the condition of a slave ... accepting death on a cross” in order that we may have life. The resurrection is God’s final victory over suffering, sin and death.

Christianity focuses on the Cross of Jesus as its central symbol. This does not amount to the glorification of suffering and violence. To the contrary, by inviting us to share in Christ’s passion, we are able to confront darkness and sin in the knowledge these are but passing realities. The Cross always points to the Resurrection and the promise of eternal life for all who acclaim “Jesus Christ as Lord”.
St Paul’s advice for Christian living seems alarmingly negative: life is very short, so don’t get too caught up in things of the world, whether relationships, politics, economics or cultural pursuits. His reason is simple: “the world as we know it is passing away”.

In fact, the passing nature of the world in which we live today is occurring at an increasingly rapid pace due to the technological revolution which impacts on jobs, communications, travel, climate, habitat, lifestyle, business, recreation, to name a few. Time seems to be moving faster, the seasons and years shorter, the experiences of life more fleeting. Indeed, the world as we know it is passing away with accelerating speed.

In other terms, we recognise increasing threats of terrorism, global warming, nuclear war and what is fast becoming the largest mass
migration of human beings in history. While the biblical destruction of Nineveh did not come to pass, we must wonder if the destruction of peoples, cultures and entire eco-systems in our current world is not the impending Nineveh-disaster of our own times.

Clearly, it is now our time to listen to the voices of the prophets ably summarised in the words of Jesus: “The time has come; the kingdom of God is close at hand; repent and believe in the Good News”. Or in the words of Pope Francis: “It is we human beings who need to change” if we are “to safeguard our common home” (planet earth), enact justice for all people (especially the poor and marginalised), and provide a world that will be habitable for future generations.

Jonah, John the Baptist, Jesus and Francis are at one in challenging human greed and corruption which threaten us and our world. Nonetheless, however things may appear, there is no cause for despair. We have genuine human, spiritual and practical options. Like Simon, Andrew, James and John, we too are being “called by name” to leave behind the things that bind us, and to become missionary disciples of God’s justice and mercy. This is what Jesus calls “the Good News” and what Francis calls “The joy of the Gospel”.

To be sure, we are not capable of saving ourselves or our world. This is the great teaching of Christianity that only God brings reconciliation, healing, final hope and salvation. Nonetheless, God calls us to be partners in this work of creation and salvation. Like the prophets and apostles before us, we too are called to be co-workers with Christ and the Holy Spirit in enabling the “reign of God” to come about. This is our gift and responsibility.

We must pray for the courage of the first disciples to give ourselves wholeheartedly to our relationship with Jesus and commitment to his mission of mercy. Likewise, we pray that the Church, its leaders and ourselves will not shy away from the radical demands of the Gospel and discipleship.