

Windows on the world

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

The wife of one of my predecessors in my last parish was a lady of high standards and challenging temperament. I was told that she had a right way and a wrong way to do everything. Perhaps her most idiosyncratic was, when she was washing the manse windows, she would always wear her hat. It's a level of civilisation I have never aspired to, even in Morningside.

But the windows had to be clean, not only so she could see out, but so that people could see in, and that the manse was always ready for visitors.

In Calvinistic countries in the C17th the purchase and use of curtains and shutters was frowned upon. The reasoning being, what had people to hide? Again, windows were there for lolling in and out. God's people should have nothing to hide, and in any event, nothing can be hidden from God. Windows help us look in and look out. Windows help us see the world around us, and the people in it. Windows help us see God.

How high up would you need to go to see God? Up here in the pulpit? Climb a tree? Climb a tower? Climb a mountain? Fly in a plane? Take a rocket to outer space?

People of faith have had a fixation on trying to locate God in time and space. The arches of this neo-gothic building draw our eyes upwards, to where the ancient and medieval mind imagined God to be. Habakkuk in his prophecy, as you might remember from a few weeks back, climbed up a high tower to look out to see what God was going to say – looking for words written in a vision so big that anyone could see and no-one could miss.

And then there's Zacchaeus.

*Zacchaeus was a very little man
And a very little man was he
He climbed up into a sycamore tree
For the Saviour he wanted to see
And when the Saviour passed that way
He looked into the tree
And said, "Now, Zacchaeus, you come down
For I'm coming to your house for tea"*

I was in Jericho a few years ago, and next to the saddest looking camel in all Christendom, there was a sycamore tree that was alleged to be a descendant of the tree into which Zacchaeus climbed. The tree was the tower and window from which Zacchaeus looked out. It was his window on the world. He climbed it because he was, “small of stature”; he climbed it because the crowd was in the way; he climbed it because he wanted, “to see Who Jesus was.”

Up in his sycamore tree, Zacchaeus’ window on the world, he wanted to see Who Jesus was.

The lofty vantage point did something else. It took Zacchaeus out of the reach of those in the crowd who might be hostile towards him. Not just any old tax collector, but the chief tax collector. In a community where poverty would have been endemic, Zacchaeus was rich, not by the sweat of his brow or the labour of his hands, but by removing money through tax from the people around him. The tax system of the Roman government was corrupt. The loftier one’s position in that system the greater one’s complicity. “He’s a sinner”, the crowd murmured later on.

It was from that vantage point that Zacchaeus could look out through his window on the world. He could see the town where he worked. He could see the people from whom he extorted money. But high up in that tree, looking out of his window on the world, one other thing became possible. Jesus could see him. Jesus could see Zacchaeus.

Unless you’ve got some fancy, one-way glass, the whole point of a window is that you can see out, and others can see in. Zacchaeus might very well have wanted to see Jesus, but that desire, whatever prompted it, and that’s a big question in itself, also meant that Jesus was able to see Zacchaeus.

From his window on the world, looking out, Zacchaeus overcame the risk of ridicule and embarrassment, and that is fundamental to the happy conclusion of the story. Had Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was a friend of sinners and tax collectors? Could Zacchaeus see, when their eyes must have locked, that this Man, this wandering rabbi, this compelling carpenter, this visible Saviour, was going to talk about forgiveness, and welcome and inclusion?

Zacchaeus climbed up high to look down through his window on the world. Only to find Jesus looking up, and hear Him call the little man down, and tell him to go and get his house ready because this Jesus was coming to stay.

How high up do we need to climb to see God? Up here in the pulpit? Up a tree? Up a tower? Up a mountain? In a plane? In a rocket? Or do we simply have to look through our own window on the world, and see Jesus at ground level, inviting us to be with Him; inviting Himself to be with us. Forgiving. Welcoming. Including.

By being forgiven, welcomed and included, Zacchaeus himself became a window on the world. For those with eyes to see, looking at Zacchaeus, and looking through Zacchaeus, God's mercy is seen. All the brokenness, all the isolation, all the misery, all the bad-ness that clouded, dimmed, corrupted, tarnished, the life of this little man is cleaned away. What is revealed is a child of God. That little lost soul was found because he was seen by the Saviour, who looked through the window of his life, and did what needed to be done to save him and transform him.

Last Sunday afternoon the Friends of Morningside hosted a lovely event. Towards the end of it, some of our guests came through to the Church with me and we looked at the glory of our stained glass windows. We looked at all of these saints and marvelled at the colour and the artistry, and maybe wondered a little about their stories. All these saints looking down on us as examples of piety and prayer and aspirational Christianity. Matthew, also a tax collector like Zacchaeus, feared and despised. Columba, involved in battles where many were killed and who was forced, in penance, to go into exile from Ireland. Francis, before he was the friend of animals and birds, was a wealthy young aristocrat ignoring the needs of the poor. Peter, who denied Jesus three times. In the Burne Jones window in the section depicting Luke, around the communion table, is one of the stained glass 'saints' Judas, the betrayer?

Like Zacchaeus, high up, these stained glass saints are not only images of piety and perfection, they are images of how flawed, broken human beings, seen by God, may yet experience God's healing, transforming, forgiving light shining through them, giving us hope. They become windows on God's world of mercy and inclusion.

None so broken they can't be mended. None so wicked they can't be forgiven. None so sick they can't be healed. None so lost they can't be found. None so unable to keep their promises that they can't be given another chance. None so unclean on the inside that they can't be purified. None so narrow-minded that they can't be enlightened. None so stuck in their ways that they can't be moved. None so hard-hearted that they can't be softened. None so invisible that they can't be seen.

The truth is you don't have to get very high up to see God. God comes right down to see us, through the eyes of Jesus. God rubs away at the sin-encrusted window panes of our lives until we can see out, and He can see in. And that is a beautiful, beautiful thing.

Elizabeth Kübler Ross, who wrote about pastoral care and bereavement, once said this:

"People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within."

Sparkle and shine by all means, but my prayer for you and for me is that our true beauty, our best selves, will be revealed by the light of our faith that shines from within. That we might be windows on the world, and windows for the world, letting others see the vision of God – through us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen