

# Is it too late?

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4;11-12, Luke 19:1-10

Rev J Shannon

Last weekend, there was a newspaper article about young people thinking of buying their first home. It said they'd better not depend on the bank of mom and dad – unless they had chosen their parents wisely.

That's the point – we don't get a choice. Nor do we often get to choose who forms us into the beings we are or when spiritual formation will take place.

Monday is (All Hallows) All Saints Day and I want to give a nod to both the saints and the sinners who have formed us. But first, our readings today...

The letter to the Thessalonians is about holding fast. Don't give up. The persecution and discomfort of following Jesus will be worth it in the end. They are a fractious lot; growing impatient for the coming of the Lord. The message is: Stay faithful.

Luke's story is about how the faithful are not always the socially acceptable: That we don't get to choose who's in and who's out. There is a time for everyone and sometimes that time is now.

So let's talk about Zacchaeus and then we'll talk about saints.

Two things are clear. He is short and he is a tax collector. Well, 'short, seems to be an understatement. I am told (and I didn't do Greek at college) that the Greek words used to describe him did not mean short. They were more like small – like a child. In other words, poor Zac was somewhere between 'short' and tiny like a person living with dwarfism.

How do you think he was treated as an adolescent? What complexities did his stature add to his job prospects? How do you think he was respected in the community?

So tax collector seems like a good career. It had power, influence and income. That is the upside. The downside is that tax collecting as a career was about as low as low that you could go. Worse than being collectively condemned as dishonest (something Zacchaeus confesses) – they were traitors. Their job was to ruthlessly collect taxes for Rome -the occupying regime. These were not taxes that would be used for the good of the people but rather to make the rich richer and to fund the army of their own oppression.

He was an object of disdain...but rich! An unlikely candidate for salvation. And definitely the opposite of the 'Rich Ruler' in Luke 18:18-23. He wasn't even sure why he was seeking Jesus but he knew he had to see him...and he *was* seen. And that changed his life. Again, in opposite to the Rich Ruler, Zac had no trouble parting with his money – it was not who he was. And unlike the ruler looking for salvation in the future, Zacchaeus was saved today.

Zacchaeus was hardly a saint. Surely there were people in the community more deserving. Surely there were people in the crowd who were true believers; more faithful, led clean lives and contributed to society. We heard them muttering.

We talk of people who are 'saints' as clearly ones who have lived clean lives and endured great hardship. My family refer to Geoff as St Geoff for his forbearance.

In truth, there are very few saints that lived blameless lives. Oh, yes, there were a few. St Casmir died so young he didn't have time to do anything wrong. But that is the exception – not the rule.

St Francis did not honour his father and mother. He chose his own career and was an irritant to the church all his life. St Mary McKillop was excommunicated at one point. (for insubordination, I believe) St Augustine didn't become a Christian until he was 32. St Olga of Kiev slaughtered almost every man woman and child from the village of the man who murdered her husband and sold the survivors into slavery. Years later, she went into a church and was awed. Somewhat like Zacchaeus, she turned her life around.

There was another saint, who's name I can't remember, who was a terrible seductress. She did it for fun – not for money. Today's media would have labelled her a sex addict. Even on the ship going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she seduced every man on board – and then went into the desert and lived a 'blameless' life of faith and productivity.

Even Mother Theresa was accused of selling out and supping with the devil for her shameless fundraising for her community. She was comfortable with the end justifying the means.

I needn't go on but look at our heroes. Matthew was a tax collector (we know about them) and Paul not only hated Christians, he persecuted them mercilessly.

So of all the people we have canonised – although they became great Christians by the time they died, none of them were beyond criticism at some point in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Some were downright horrible. And what about our other heroes. How do we treat them differently. George Washington owned slaves (and father many children) but they are not pulling his stature down or renaming cities. Rhodes made a fortune from slave trading and then furthered education around the world. His statue has been vandalised. Why do we expect perfection when God doesn't?

We are the worst judges...that is, we judge.

Last Friday, the Merimbula Uniting Social Dance group had a Halloween themed night and posted videos of 3 'witches' dancing on its Facebook page and a community billboard. Not surprisingly, the page had over 150 views. Equally, not surprising, as wont with social

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<sup>1</sup> Butler's Lives of the Saints 1756

media, a person posted a comment calling the post 'evil'. Now I'm certain that this person does not believe for a minute that a coven of Wiccans has sprung up in the Uniting Church ... but just couldn't resist. We judge. We look over the fence – and we judge.

It is easy to look over the fence and feel righteous. Many of us reject fundamentalism because of their judgment of others and their certainty that they are right and everyone else is wrong.

I'll be honest and say I haven't read Daryl Van Tongeren's book, *Humble*<sup>2</sup>, ...yet ...but I was taken by Nadia Boltz-Webber's conversation about it. Perhaps it's time to introduce some intellectual humility. After all, all racism is based on me feeling superior to another. My immediate reaction to the Halloween post comment that it was 'evil' was one of arrogance. I laughed. How stupid. So is it ever too late? Can we be saved today?

There is an antidote.

We need to know ourselves. It is not easy to acknowledge and own our cognitive limitations and the fallibility of our beliefs. They are, after all, OUR beliefs – maybe not someone else's.

This is a hard one. We need to control ourselves – restrain our egos and our need for superiority and defensiveness and especially being circumspect when sharing our viewpoint with others.

It means going beyond just being there or tolerating while they blah, blah, blah, we have to listen, be teachable, cultivate curiosity and seek to understand the other's viewpoint. – just as Zacchaeus sought Jesus. We need to be compelled to seek to understand.

Van Tongeren studied people who had left or rejected fundamentalism only to find that many simply shifted the target of their vitriol. They were just as hard line; just as judgmental – but from a different direction.

I've seen this in angry atheists. It is not enough that they don't believe they feel the rest of the world shouldn't either. How is that different from fundamentalism?

The great Rev William James said, "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

Nadia Boltz-Webber said after reading Van Tongeren that maybe the opposite of religious fundamentalism wasn't atheism or liberalism. Maybe the opposite of fundamentalism is humility.

I found the discussion rather challenging so I wrote a little prayer for myself.

Wisdom speaker, God of all that we learn,

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<sup>2</sup> *Humble*: The Quiet Power of an Ancient Virtue By: Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Published: 2nd August 2022. Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Ph.D. is a social psychologist and professor of psychology at Hope College, Michigan, USA. He has spent the last decade researching humility and its transformative powers.

Humble me...

Slow down my voracious mind

So I can chew on small bits, mindfully

and see your word in tiny morsels,

taste explosions and flavors

behind the words and thoughts of others.

Humble me...

Stop the internal commentary to

Break open my ears

Sit silent in awe

And perhaps see beyond my own knowing.

Humble me...

I have grown fat on my own intellect and

seek the agility of a slender, inquiring mind.

Give me a diet of humble-weed and I will sing your praises forever.

Amen

That's the last part of the antidote. Seek Jesus. Seek to be seen and God will move in you in ways none of us expected. God had already planted the seed that made Zacchaeus seek Jesus. Before that, he may have thought he had no choices. We have choices.

Let's take a moment to give thanks to all the good and the bad, the broken and imperfect people who either led by example, taught us otherwise or became role models of the life we *wouldn't* live. Edward Barton was a racist – so was my grandfather. That does not undo what they achieved. They were all here for a purpose.

Some saints started out on a path but many people who found salvation were simply struck by God's power. It was no accident that Zac felt compelled to see Jesus even though he had no interest in his movement. St Olga touched by liturgy, in awe of the presence of God, went on to build churches across Eastern Europe. The hand of God works only in God's time but we can choose to be open. Let it be so!