

Sermon, Sunday 2nd November 2025,

Luke 19:1-10,

Alex Johnson.

‘WWJD?’ to ‘WWZD?’

I'm sure many of you would have heard the initialism W.W.J.D., which stands for the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’. It is this idea that as Christians, part of what we aim to do is to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. As it says in second Corinthians, we are being transformed into Christ's image through the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). So this question ‘What would Jesus do?’ is a way of navigating life with Christ-like values in mind. In my youth, we wore this as a bracelet, a physical reminder of the virtues of our rabbi.

It is powerful and, quite frankly, if all I do this morning is to remind you of that idea then that's no bad thing. It is a strong principle by which to live our lives. However, there are times when ‘W.W.J.D?’ is not the right question to ask. There are times when Jesus cannot model what we are to do. In those situations, it has been suggested by Jennifer Harvey and others, that we ask the question ‘W.W.Zed.D?’, ‘What would Zacchaeus do?’

The reason for this is that we don't always occupy the same position as Jesus. Most obviously, Jesus was God while we are not, Jesus was sinless while we are not. But there are also other differences between us and our saviour, differences in our position in society. For example, Jesus was an itinerant member of a minority group within a foreign empire. He was vulnerable in a way that we are often not. While Jesus' dusty feet brought salvation, we can often withhold it, refusing people access to what God intends to give them. While Jesus is the messiah, we are ordinary human beings. As you can see, it is not always appropriate to place ourselves in the role of Jesus. We are not the centre of the story, as Jesus is, and so sometimes we need to decentre ourselves and take on a different character within the narrative. As much as we aim to be Christ-like, we cannot always take on that role. Instead, we have to search for different characters to occupy within the story, whether that's Martha or Timothy or Lydia or, as in this case, Zacchaeus. Sometimes we have to stop identifying with Christ because sometimes Jesus goes where we cannot go and does what we cannot do and sometimes a different actor should be our model.

Repentance: A Heavy Word

So what exactly does Zacchaeus do? In a word, he repents. A heavy word: a recognition of guilt that results in a change of behaviour. It is more than an apology, which is easily given, instead it is a reorientation of life around newly appreciated perspectives. The unrepentant carry on doing what they are doing, justifying their behaviour by their own standards. The repentant begin a transformation, ultimately learning to live life in a new way.

Zacchaeus is emblematic of what that means, for Zacchaeus saw an opportunity. The occupation of Israel by the Roman empire subjected the people to a new system of taxation which the Romans chose not to enforce by sending the tax-man out from Rome but by recruiting locals to collect it on their behalf. This was a situation these tax-collectors, like Zacchaeus, could exploit by fabricating taxes entirely or else overcharging on the taxes he was instructed to collect. Such complicity with the occupying power for such self-serving ends and through such distasteful means was not popular, to say the least. It made tax-collectors, like Zacchaeus and Matthew, pariahs. That special hatred reserved not for the enemy but for the collaborators, those that try to escape oppression by siding with the oppressor. For sure, many benefitted from the Roman occupation, but tax collectors were visible representations of many people's greatest resentment.

Prior to his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus must have justified himself in his own eyes, because I doubt he had many days when his status as a corrupt traitor was not made clear to him. Perhaps the bold said it to his face, but everyone would have been clear enough through the myriad of ways that communities learn to shun distasteful elements. Perhaps he thought everyone else was backward, living in a dreamland of national independence, or else saw greater allegiance to himself rather than to the community, or perhaps he struggled with himself, wounded by the insults thrown at him yet too fearful to change.

In any case, Jesus reaches across this divide. As he journeys towards Jerusalem, with growing popular support, in the aftermath of a miraculous healing at the city gate, Jesus stops and uses his social capital to extend a lifeline to this man halfway up a tree. This act of charity by Jesus and the murmur of grumbling that rises out of the crowd is enough to spur Zacchaeus into action, as he announces his repentance, his rejection of the system of oppression, and the promise of reparations. In response, Jesus declares his restoration to the community, a restoration that carries immediate social consequences but also significant religious consequences as Jesus declares Zacchaeus to be a recognised descendant of Abraham and therefore an inheritor of God's promises.

This is what we mean by repentance; a recognition of wrong coupled with the bravery to take restorative steps. Its fruit is reconciliation.

Culture of Repentance

So by exchanging our 'W.W.J.D' bracelets for 'W.W.Zed.D', we are reunderstanding ourselves not as mini-messiahs, but as secondary characters responding to the person of Jesus Christ. We are decentering ourselves to reflect the significance of the one who goes where we cannot go and does what we cannot do. The one who can occupy the places that sometimes we cannot, for more often than not I am not as oppressed or as vulnerable as Jesus was, and I am certainly not as righteous as Jesus was. By exchanging our bracelets, we are not throwing out the idea that Jesus models what a good human life should be, instead we are

understanding our position in relation to that good human life. This matters because by making this change perhaps we can create a culture of repentance within our lives and communities. This isn't an obsession with self-flagellation, but an acceptance of the realities of our existence and an openness to the world which Jesus inaugurated through his life, death, and resurrection.

To demonstrate what I mean, let me make a little bit of a pivot. In the midst of their eight season long championship winning run, Mercedes Formula One team publicly attributed much of their success to a 'no-blame' culture. This was the deal: the company offered loyalty to their employees in return for a willingness to admit fault and work as a team to find a solution. This culture sacrificed pride for the greater good while fostering a focused and motivated team spirit. I don't know what's happened to it in the last few seasons but I imagine when you're not winning you get asked less about your management techniques.

Though by no means a perfect analogy, it is illustrative of what I mean by a culture of repentance. At times in life, we may need to match Zacchaeus' level of repentance. Jennifer Harvey, who I mentioned earlier, saw this as an important shift within the discussion of race in America. For justice to be done, white people need to resonate more with Zacchaeus than Jesus. At times we may be pointed in completely the wrong direction and we need to turn our lives around to follow Jesus, but I would suggest that the initialism 'W.W.Zed.D' applies more broadly than in just those situations. It is inclusive of issues of racism but it also applies more broadly. It symbolises an attitude which is open to the transformation of our relationship with God and with others not by becoming mini-messiahs but by accepting that we are one of the number that Jesus came to save, just as Zacchaeus was. It recognises that we are complicit in corrupt structures and capable of damaging the people around us, even at the ordinary and commonplace level. A culture of repentance doesn't require things to reach breaking point, instead it is open to the reality of wrongdoing and willing to pursue reconciliation.

Shifting our Position

The example of Zacchaeus, therefore, allows us to shift our position from that which we would most like to be, that of the knight in shining armour, and adopt a different position which highlights the centrality of Jesus in all that we do. It provides for us an opportunity to do that which Jesus' adversaries failed to do, to recognise our common humanity ahead of recognising our divine mandate. A culture of repentance repositions us within the story. As we see with Zacchaeus, this does not reduce our value as human beings nor the impact of living faithfully, but it shifts our role within the recreation of the world.

This matters because like the Mercedes Formula One team created a different environment within their sporting success, we can shift the dynamic within our social circles, our church, and our communities. When we find ourselves in this same fractious situation as Zacchaeus,

if we adopt the position of the messiah, nothing changes. If we ask 'what would Jesus do?', we expect to be able to fix it. When we ask 'what would Zacchaeus do?' we look for the intervention of the God who so loved the world that he was able to stop in the middle of this crowded street, look up into a tree, and bring reconciliation. When we ask 'what would Zacchaeus do?', we are asking what is our response to the love we have found in Jesus.

This shift, this decentralisation, has the power to change the dynamic within our homes and in our social circles to one that is built on the foundation of Jesus, rather than our own ability to be Christ-like. It has the power to break down our misunderstanding of ourselves and place us fundamentally in reference to the one we worship, to dismantle our pride so that salvation might come.

'W.W.J.D' is a wonderful thing to have on a bracelet, but I wonder what might be the impact of one that reads 'W.W.Zed.D'.

Amen.