

Hymns: 148 "Come, let us with our Lord arise"  
 158 "Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders"  
 "Zacchaeus was a tax man"  
 "When peace like a river"

Readings: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4 & 11-12  
 Luke 19:1-10

### **"NOBODIES BECOME SOMEBODIES"**

Fifteen of us gathered yesterday for the last in our series of Saturday morning, ecumenical, study groups. Over the last five weeks, we've been looking at a book written by a woman called Paula Gooder entitled "Everyday God". We've had a lot of fun together and probed the mystery of life, prodded at it, poked our noses into the nature of faith and its place in the modern world.

The book we were reading discusses "ordinariness". It began by reminding us that we are living in what the Church calls "ordinary time". The Church here has 19 Sundays that are seasonal: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. That leaves 33 Sundays that are "ordinary" – today, for example, is the 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in ordinary time. Most of our lives outside the church are also lived in ordinary time. Does that mean we eke out our days in dull, repetitive, hum-drum, unremarkable routines? Do we make our way through life on automatic pilot? Not at all. At least that's what we decided in our discussion group. For it's in the ordinariness of the everyday that moments of illumination come.

We began this course by looking at a poem by R S Thomas. He's describing a field, a field he's looked at thousands of times – so much so that he no longer notices it. Until, that is, one day when everything was different. It was transformed and brought alive by a burst of sunlight that settled in a corner of the field. Just consider how the poet described that sight:

*I have seen the sun break through  
 to illuminate a small field  
 for a while, and gone my way  
 and forgotten it. But that was the  
 pearl of great price, the one field that had  
 treasure in it. I realise now  
 that I must give all that I have  
 to possess it. Life is not hurrying*

*on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
 an imagined past. It is the turning  
 aside like Moses to the miracle  
 of the lit bush, to a brightness*

*that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

So many people are bored with conventional, predictable, ordinary life. Our newspapers are full of sports people who resort to performance enhancing substances. Or else others, young and old, who turn to consciousness-raising drugs. In that way, they believe, they can bring colour and achievement and thrills into their lives, something they could never accomplish under their own steam.

The poem suggests a different way of looking at all this. The ordinary, the familiar, can (and does) sometimes surprise us, catch us off guard, challenge our presuppositions in radical ways. A patch of sunlight reminds us of the eternity that awaits us. We see a heaven in a grain of sand, a universe in a wild flower. Time releases its hold over us, our eyes are blessed with the gift of insight as well as sight, our ears seem to become attuned to a music we've never heard before. And suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, we frail creatures of time find ourselves caught up in a vision and an experience of eternity.

This can come in a variety of ways. But it is not ours to command. A snatch of music will do it, the arrival of a new baby, a phone call from an old friend, a family meal, a good joke. And so many other experiences too. These simple and ordinary things can turn the predictable into the extraordinary, can give us a glimpse of heaven, can re-define the horizons of our hope. The burst of sunshine in the corner of a field is just one example of the way things happen in everyday life.

And if that was the conclusion of our Saturday study session, I must also refer to a different set of talks which ended at lunchtime on Thursday. October has been Black History Month and we've been looking at some authors who've given consideration to the place of black people in contemporary culture. I drew to people's attention a book by a man named Anthony Reddie called "Nobodies to Somebodies. Anthony is anxious about the apparent absence of black people from our narratives - in church and beyond the church - and is writing the materials in order to correct this tendency.

So these two books seemed to be drawing readers into a greater awareness of the special, the gifted, the glorious, the human, the eternal that's constantly around us but to which through ignorance or prejudice, we're too often blind.

And they both in their way, make the same plea. If you want to know how to become conscious of the beyond that's in midst of us, the ultimate that lies ahead of us, the bursts of sunshine in the corner of a field, we only have to look at Jesus. He can help all of us to understand this way of looking at things. He can show us how to do things his way.

And the story of Zacchaeus is the perfect illustration of his art.

Consider the crowd surrounding him, pressing him on all sides. He was at the height of his powers as he moved through Jericho that day. He had acquired a cult status. He was a celebrity before his time. Just imagine how, in today's media world, he would have been dealt with. Just once or twice I've been at the heart of a large

crowd, moving forward, people waiting to ask me questions, to offer me advice, to shout at me, to swear at me, to try to trick me into saying things I'd regret later. It's scary. You're watching for your footing. You know you must keep moving. You try hard to avoid giving people the eye. You offer a prayer to the heavens that this moment will soon pass.

The amazing thing about the story of Zacchaeus is that Jesus, caught up in just such a crowd, seemed to maintain lateral vision. He still seemed able to catch sight of, to be aware of, Zacchaeus at the edge of the crowd. This capacity to pick out the marginalised, to find the questioning, to turn to the troubled, is such a strong characteristic of Jesus. It seems like a sixth sense. Suddenly a burst of sunshine fills the patch of land where Zacchaeus is sitting on the branch of a tree. The spotlight falls on him.

Jesus went to eat with him – a cardinal error for the orthodox and law-abiding, the scrupulous religious people who surrounded Jesus. But for Zacchaeus it was the turning of a page, a radical new beginning. He could now live his life in a different way.

We note that he offered to give people back their money with interest. This wasn't required of him. We're not told that it's because he'd taken it from people dishonestly. He simply came to understand that he'd become wealthy in the pursuance of his duties and that he should share this accumulation of wealth. That itself, of course, is a radical thing.

This week marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Big Bang – the moment when currency markets went global. It has proved to be a mixed blessing. It's also been a week when yet another bank has set aside one billion pounds to cover repayments to customers for mis-selling their products, tampering with LIBOR rates, lining the pockets of already-wealthy top executives. What a week to hear a rich man say that he'll give half his fortune away. He did it without reference to an office of Fair Trading or by asking for the services of a financial services regulator. "I'll give it back" he said and his intentions were clear.

In addition to that, of course, he recognised that he'd gained some of his money through improper activity – whether putting pressure on people to pay or else forcing them to cough up. The offer he made to them was and remains breath-taking. He'd give them back four times anything he'd taken from them illicitly, he said.

This all flowed from the heart of a man who knew his whole life had been changed. And yet Jesus doesn't tell him that his initial activity – the collecting of taxes – was wrong. He must go back to his trade. But he must do it humbly and honestly and with the good of his customers and clients in mind.

Here's the evidence of our everyday God; the God who brings the extraordinary out of the ordinary; who brings a smile to a previously bland face; who turns a nobody into a somebody; who dashes a burst of sunshine into the corner or an otherwise unremarkable field; who gives meaning to a man's life; who gives purpose and direction and value to a human being who's lost.

After 50 years of preaching a message rather like this – a message of good news for our time – I find myself still excited at the prospect of doing so. It still seems to me to have a freshness all of its own. It challenges all the cultural pressures that weigh heavily upon us. It offers hope where there is despair, light where there's darkness, and value where life has been emptied of meaning. The story of Zacchaeus does all that for me. It's not the mere narrative that we learned in Sunday School of a little man climbing a tree. It's the story that throws light on the salvation history of humankind. Of the difference that Jesus can make to everything around us. That's a message that starts in the human heart but only ends when it's swept the whole world with hope. It's a message that yours. And mine. Here and now.

Amen.