

BCA Conference – Manly, Tuesday 29th May 2018

Morning Reflection - “Everyone is Welcome” – Radical Inclusiveness and the Power of Acceptance

Luke 19: 1-10

The road Jesus was on took him through the town of Jericho. There was a man named Zacchaeus there who was despised as a traitor, because he had made his fortune working as a debt collector for the Roman occupation forces. He was eager to lay eyes on Jesus, but so was everyone else and he couldn't see past the crowd because he was too short. So he nicked up the street a bit and climbed a tree in order to get a good view when Jesus came past. When Jesus got to that point on the road, he looked up and called out to him, “Zacchaeus, come on down. I need you to put me up at your place for the night.”

Zacchaeus nearly fell out of his tree in his eagerness to welcome Jesus into his home. The onlookers, though, were outraged, and they began to grumble. “This Jesus has lost the plot. He's gone home with the scum of the earth.”

Zacchaeus stood up and said to Jesus, “I'm turning over a new leaf, Lord. I am giving half of everything I own to the poor, and anybody I have ripped off, I am repaying four times over.”

In reply, Jesus announced, “God's new life has broken out in this house today. ..”

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For many of you sitting here this morning who have been brought up in a church context, the story of Zacchaeus will be familiar. It is probably one of the key go-to Sunday School Bible stories of all time. This is mainly because like many of the parables and stories of Jesus of Nazareth in the Bible, it is a simple and funny story. I can picture now many illustrations like this one showing the short fat Zaccheus climbing the sycamore tree to get a better look at this itinerant Jewish mystic and preacher on his way through his home town in Jericho. I can remember colouring in the picture.



But like all the parables and stories in the Gospels there is so much more going on in this one than a funny story about a vertically challenged and introverted tax cheat who is called out by Jesus.

In the context of first century Palestine, Zaccheus was deeply hated for basically being a traitor to his Jewish compatriotes. As a collector of punishingly unfair taxes and customs, he only had to answer to the Roman authorities on an agreed amount – they didn't care how much he collected from people. So he was actually working for himself and the hated, violent Roman occupiers and while he had a very successful business plan, he was also deeply despised. I can hear the well-known joke circulating in the Jericho community:

“What do you call 10 Tax Collectors at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea?...

A bloody good start!”

In the story, Jesus comes by and in front of the crowd, stops under the tree, looks up to where he is hiding and invites Zaccheus to eat with him. The acceptance and inclusion of such a hated person brought Jesus much criticism but, it also transformed Zaccheus at a profound level and changed his life forever.

Perhaps to feel the power of this story at the same level today we need to translate it into our own context. Imagine instead how we might feel living next door to, let's say, a registered, recovering paedophile who as result of his past is universally and deeply hated. What would it take, in front of all the watching neighbours to accept the humanity and loneliness of this man and invite him into our home for a meal?



I recall using this same example recently at a Board Reflection. One of the Board members spoke up and voicing what probably everyone one in the room was thinking said, “I don't know Geoff, but I think we'd have to draw the line somewhere..”

There is in fact a subtle but critically important detail in the Story of Zacchaeus and that is that Jesus didn't invite him over for a meal, he instead engages Zacchaeus through accepting Zacchaeus' hospitality.

Chris Turner, a previous chaplain in our Sanctuary supported accommodation program for Asylum seekers, reflects on this dynamic and the profound affect it can have on some of the most deeply traumatised and stigmatised people in our community.

“One resident invited me to share lunch in his room. We sat together on his floor and ate the food he had prepared. As we ate the conversation turned to his experiences and he shared openly and with great trust his story of over twenty years living without citizenship in a foreign country seeking to avoid persecution on the basis of his ethnicity. Then detainment, deportation, imprisonment, torture before fleeing again to Australia. This quiet and humble man fed me and trusted me. These moments leave me feeling moved beyond words.

.. On another occasion a resident invited me for a 15 minute walk. He went away and came back with a backpack on his back. We walked to a local park that is important to him. Expecting to keep walking and return to



Sanctuary I was surprised when he asked me to sit with him at a picnic table. As we sat together and he produced some napkins from his bag, placed some fresh tomatoes and cucumbers on the napkins, put some bottles of water next to them, connected his phone to his Bluetooth speaker and proceeded to play beautiful music. “Will you eat with me Chris?” he asked. “Yes I will!” I replied. As we ate and drank together he told me his story. We talked about religion and the harm it had done to him. We talked of life and God, the absence of God and the wonder that human bodies when they die will nurture the earth and allow life to continue. It was beautiful.

These moments are sacred. They reveal the depth of the mystery of human life and give me a glimpse of the divine ground of that life.”

Giving and accepting hospitality is a transforming way of embracing the humanity of the other – no matter how different they are, it was the power of this simple and profound acceptance that transformed Zaccheaus in our story.

Radical inclusiveness is about learning to see past hatred and prejudice in all its subtle and complex forms to see the common humanity of the person before us.

This kind of radical inclusiveness is what is at the heart of the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth and is what has been passed down to us as the very heartbeat of our missional integrity as organisations serving people with the same sense of welcome.

It is the same transforming inclusiveness that motivated Thomas Helwys (one of the founders of the Baptist movement) to publish his book entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* that, though sounding like an obscure title today, in 1612 was the finest defence of religious toleration that England had ever seen and resulted in Helwys’ imprisonment for his efforts.

It is the same transforming inclusiveness that is shown in the way we do aged care that prioritises whole-person care, that acknowledges and addresses spiritual wellbeing regardless of religious background,

It is the same transforming inclusiveness that lights up the eyes of so many of the parents and families in our support programs when they experience a worker who treats them like an equal human being, who is interested in their story, as they sit in their kitchen sipping on lukewarm tea from an odd cup..



It is the same transforming inclusiveness that was behind the words of our General manager for Mission Development, Andrew Billing a few weeks ago when he accepted on behalf of Baptcare, The Tasmanian 2018 Dorothies Award for Inclusive and Faith Based Service for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and their families.



“In accepting the award on our behalf, I expressed our pleasure at receiving an award that recognised our work in serving the LGBTI community. I also commented that:

The Baptist faith tradition, like many others, was born from the fires of discrimination. As such, Baptcare take prejudice and equality seriously. To us this means understanding and embracing each person’s individuality, standing up for their equality and protecting their dignity.”

At Baptcare recently we’ve started a conversation about what it means to have Mission integrity. One thing that prompted this conversation was recognising that the way staff relate each other as whole human beings is the beginning of this integrity. So, let’s begin our conference by acknowledging the not-so-scary elephant in the room today.

We are a diverse bunch of leaders from a diverse set of backgrounds. Our commitment to our values and mission brings us together, but in terms of personal religious faith and views we most likely have the full spectrum represented here today.

But the challenge of the story of Zacchaeus that we began with, comes to all of us regardless of where we are on our own personal spiritual journey (and everyone is on a spiritual journey).

If “Everyone is Welcome” is to become a hallmark of our organisations, the challenge is to practice radical acceptance in how we relate to each other, to practice curiosity and wonder that leads to an expectation of being surprised and delighted by what we can learn from those who are different than us..

Carrie Newcomer, a North American Folk Singer, poet and practicing Quaker captures this practice in a beautiful poem entitled, “A Permeable Life”. And I offer this to you as a manifesto of openness to carry us into the days ahead..



A Permeable Life

By Carrie Newcomer.

I want to leave enough room in my heart
 For the unexpected,
 For the mistake that becomes knowing,
 For knowing that becomes wonder,
 For wonder that makes everything porous,
 Allowing in and out
 All available light.

An impermeable life is full to the edges,
 But only to the edges.
 It is a limited thing.
 Like the pause at the centre of the breath,
 Neither releasing or inviting,
 With no hollow spaces
 For longing and possibility,

I would rather live unlocked,
 And more often than not astonished,
 Which is possible
 If I am willing to surrender
 What I already think I know.

So I will stay open
 And companionably friendly,
 With all that presses out from the heart And comes in at a slant
 And shimmers just below
 The surface of everything.

Carrie Newcomer, *A Permeable Life: Poems & Essays.* Available Light Publishing, 2014.