**Sermon for Stowe Sunday 19th September 2021 at 9.45am**

**‘The Essential Teaching of Jesus’**

**2. Why did he come? To heal and to save**

Isaiah 61: 1-3; Luke 19: 1-11

This is part 2 of a series entitled ‘The Essential Teaching of Jesus’. Last week I believe Ron was answering the question ‘Who was Jesus?’ Today we tackle the question ‘Why did he come?’ And there are quite a few answers to that question.

May I first take one step back from these very important questions to ask (and try to answer) an even more fundamental question: What is God’s ultimate aim? That’s a very deep question, though I believe the apostle Paul answered this when writing to the Ephesians:

‘And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when times have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth under one head, even Christ.’

Ephesians 1: 9-10

I wrote a poem some time ago, based on these verses:

God’s ultimate aim for His own good pleasure

is to gather the whole of creation together,

to put it all under the headship of Christ,

who has already rendered the ultimate price,

when the times and the seasons have run their full measure.

So if you want a succinct summary of God’s purpose in one word it would be … roll on the drums … UNITY. All one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). Oneness. All of one heart and mind. God and mankind as family. And I think that picture we get is summed up in the late chapters of Revelation, in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. I believe that is all one object, ie a new ‘heaven-and-earth’. Because if we are all one then there is no need to separate the two. New heaven on new earth.

So if we can bear that in mind as we look together at this question of why Jesus came, it helps to see what Jesus did and why he did it.

Our Isaiah 61 reading is one Jesus himself quoted (Luke 4: 18-19), though he didn’t quite complete it, stopping short of talking about vengeance in v2. All this was a means to the end – unity. So the things Jesus did were preach good news to the poor – tick – bind up the broken-hearted – tick – proclaim freedom for the captives – tick – release for prisoners – tick – proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour – tick. The Isaiah continues (though it’s not reported Jesus said this) that he has come to comfort those who mourn and provide for those who grieve.

Now, this may be controversial, but I believe Jesus ranked preaching good news above healing. Yes, they clearly go together, but in that order. In my defence, may I point you to Mark 1 where crowds came to him for healing and he said this: ‘Let’s go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. For that is why I have come.’

Similarly in Luke 2 where the crowds begged him to stay in their village, and he replied ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.’

Out NT reading Luke 19 takes place in Jericho, which is in a very strategic place, being in the Jordan Valley commanding both the approach to Jerusalem and crossings of the river which gave it access to the lands east of the Jordan. Jericho was named ‘City of Palms’ because of the great forest of palm trees, and it also had world-famous balsam groves which perfumed the air for miles around. The historian Josephus called it ‘a divine region’. The conquering Romans took advantage of the richness of the crops, and exported dates and balsam all over the known world.

All this combined to make Jericho one of the biggest taxation centres in Palestine. Tax collectors extracted as much as they could on behalf of Rome, and any beside which they kept for themselves. And Zacchaeus was one of the taxmen of the town.

So Luke tells the well-known story of Zacchaeus. As the children’s song puts it,

‘Zacchaeus was a very little man,

and a very little man was he.’

He may have been small in stature but he was a very powerful man, being one of the chief tax-collectors, working for the Romans – which made him at the same time very rich and very unpopular.

You know the story of Zacchaeus, how he saw the route Jesus was taking and went ahead and climbed a fig-sycomore tree in order to avoid the crowds and get a sighting of this unusual man Jesus. Well, he got more than a sighting – Jesus called for him to come down, in front of all the people of the town! That wasn’t in his plan. But as Jesus said, ‘Today salvation has come to this house.’ Why? ‘For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what is lost.’ And note what Jesus meant by ‘lost.’ It doesn’t mean damned or condemned to hell, as we might translate it. Here, ‘lost’ simply means ‘in the wrong place’. If we lose something and it’s no longer where it should be, we look for it, and when we find it we put it back in its proper place. Someone is lost when they wander away from God; and they are found when they are helped to take their rightful place as a child in God’s household.

So here is Jesus giving another answer to the question as to why he came – ‘to seek and save the lost’. But we can put this and the earlier one – ‘I was sent to preach the good news‘ - together to make a more complete answer. Jesus said he came mainly to preach the gospel to those who would listen, and in preaching it to save them.

We need to note that Zacchaeus was already seeking to find out more about Jesus. He was curious about this man. His curiosity led him to do something, to act on it. Jesus had come to his town, Jericho, and Zacchaeus made it his business to find out all he could about him. More than that, he wouldn’t be put off when large crowds prevented him from getting near. I expect a few citizens also didn’t help him either; rather the reverse. But he persevered. This important, rich man actually climbed a tree in order to see this man Jesus. That shows some determination on Zacchaeus’ part.

And his persistence paid off. Jesus noticed him, though I suspect Zacchaeus only wanted to see this man Jesus, not actually get into conversation with him – nor did he really want others to notice he was up the tree; his pride was at stake here. But by now it was too late. He had to scramble down the tree in, I suspect, a rather inelegant way, although a fig-sycomore tree is apparently quite easy to climb.

And though the crowd grumbled, the story ended happily, with Jesus going to Zacchaeus’ house for tea.

With many of the stories in NT it would be nice to know what happened next, and this is one of them. What happened to Zacchaeus? Did he become popular by giving money back? Was he able to continue in his job? We don’t know. And maybe we don’t need to know, because the important thing here was that Zacchaeus was no longer lost. And that was why Jesus came, to save the lost. So after tea, Jesus would have moved on to other towns and villages to preach the good news and save more lost people. In any case, Luke tells us he was only ‘passing through’ Jericho, though as we know Jesus was always ready to alter his schedule if people need saving, or people need healing.

Going back for a moment to the title of today’s sermon ‘Why did he come? To heal and to save’, you may think I have neglected to talk about healing. But perhaps we may see them as one; after all, when Jesus met Zacchaeus he both saved him and healed him. He was a different man afterwards, both spiritually and financially. He may have been a rich man, but having met Jesus and having been ‘found’, he agreed to pay back all money he had swindled out of people. And not just to the extent of the law; not just twice what he owed (Leviticus) but four times as much. He could have ended up bankrupt. But he’d got his priorities right at last!

There have been many rich people in the world, but you don’t read of many for whom riches have brought happiness, let alone joy. When asked how much money would bring him happiness, the answer one billionaire gave was ‘just a little bit more’.

Henry Ford is quoted as saying ‘I was happier when I was doing a mechanic’s job.’ Andrew Carnegie, who made his money in steel, rather wistfully I think, said ‘Millionaires seldom smile’ - though he himself had a change of heart later in life, and having spent 40 years making a lot of money, he spent the next 40 giving nearly all of it away – there are many Carnegie foundation schools and other philanthropic enterprises in the world.

What about us? What does all this mean for us? What we learn from Zacchaeus is that what he needed was a change of heart. I’m sure he was an excellent tax-collector. He did a good job and got his just reward - and perhaps some unjust rewards too. He put his heart and soul into his work. But, I always think Zacchaeus was rather like the man who made a lot of money but still wasn’t happy: he said, ‘I climbed the ladder of success, right to the top, only to discover the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall.’

Zacchaeus put his heart into his work but his heart was in the wrong place. When he discovered Jesus, he had a change of heart and became a new man.

In Ezekiel 36:26 we are given a promise from God: ‘I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’

Some Christians are good, and upright, well-behaved and moral – but seem to have hard hearts. No warmth. I’m sure there aren’t any like that here. But we should all keep an eye on our attitudes and our behaviour toward others, so that we always show a warm heart.

Pray for a heart of flesh from Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost.

Pray.