

## Pentecost 21

Readings: Habakkuk 1:1–4, 2:1–4 and Psalm 119: 137–144 OR Isaiah 1:10–18 and Psalm 32:1–7; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12; **Luke 19:1–10**

What kind of people does the Lord Jesus want to see coming to our church?

Could it be someone like Anna McGahan?

Brought up in Brisbane, Anna is a very accomplished Australian actress. We would recognize her face immediately. And we would probably want her as a member of our church

We would find out that she has starred in a string of very successful Australian TV series and movies, the latest remake of Picnic at Hanging Rock, the Doctor Blake Mysteries, Underbelly and many many more.

We'd want her in our church wouldn't we?

But, what if we also knew she slept around with dozens and dozens of lovers, both men and women. On top of that she was a very serious drug user and alcohol abuser. That she was in and out of rehab but never really tried.

That might make us cautious. That might make us think - "we are very disappointed", or even "we don't want someone like that in our church!"

But, what sort of person does the Lord Jesus want coming to our church?

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Could it be someone like Christopher Skase - you know, the boss of channel 7 who fled to Majorca after ripping creditors off by millions and millions of dollars? Who invented all kinds of illnesses to stop authorities extraditing him to face the courts. Would we want him in our church?

What sort of people does the Lord Jesus want to see coming to our church?

Actually, the question is wrong - it's not our church but his!

And the Lord Jesus has told us exactly the kind of person he wants coming into his church.

At the end of our gospel reading today it's there for all to see:

Luke chapter 19 and verse 10:

*<sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*

Again and again in this part of the gospel of Luke he's been talking about how to get into the kingdom of heaven.

And he turns all our human ideas on their head.

It's not the religious teachers who will get in just because they were very religious.

It's not the rich young ruler with his really good life, superb pedigree and well-earned money.

And it's not even the disciples who think they have a right because they've given up everything to follow Jesus.

But impossible sinners do.

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And that's because getting into the kingdom of heaven is the reverse of what we Aussies think.

It's not because of what we have done or who we are. It's not because of your family connection, our tribe, our good living or our achievements.

As one preacher put it: the truth is that "bad" people go to heaven; "good" people go to hell.

How do we know that?

Because of:

Sinners like Zaccheus.

Zaccheus the social outcast. Zaccheus the unclean.

Wealthy - wealthy almost beyond measure. But wealthy because of cheating.

Ripping his fellow Jews off as he collected the taxes. Charging much more than he then passed on to the government.

And the government was the government of the invader.

Rome. Hated Rome! Grinding the people down like they did to every nation they beat.

Zaccheus - bribing his way into favour with the Romans.

Zaccheus - hated for doing that so he could rip other Jews off.

Taking his own cut first as the Romans told him to.

Envied as well as hated because he had made heaps.

Happy to be treated like dirt by his fellow Jews.

Happy not to be able to go to temple.

Because he had his gold.

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This man is truly lost. He is “bad”!

But to everyone’s great surprise Jesus wants him.

I sometimes wish we had video of the scene. Fat little Zac, throwing his dignity to the wind.

Climbing up the sycamore tree.

Jesus stopping.

Looking up into the surprised face of the man everyone loves to hate.

“Zaccheus” - (how does he know my name?, thinks Zaccheus).

“Come down immediately. I **must** stay at your house today.” We imagine Zaccheus thinking: (Doesn’t he know no-one ever invites themselves to my house - I’m an outcast. I’m a “sinner” - everyone knows that.

And what’s this “must” business?)

But by the time he’s almost fallen out of the tree he’s forgotten the questions and welcomes Jesus to his house gladly.

You can see him rushing around preparing food, making sure the mats are clean and the table is in its proper place.

And we don’t know all that happens,

But almost against his will, Zaccheus is changed.

The greedy, disloyal and avaricious chief tax-collector suddenly stands up and in the hearing of everyone says to the Lord Jesus:

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*“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*

Most of the hearers cannot believe their ears.

But one hearer does believe.

Jesus hears the words of repentance.

Somehow Zaccheus has heard in Jesus' words the offer of salvation.

The offer of being rescued from his lostness as a human being.

The offer of mercy to sinners who know they are sinners against God.

The offer that only comes through coming to Jesus. Coming to Jesus by making him your Lord and changing your mind about your life.

“Lord” he calls Jesus. King, boss, ruler - of everything.

And seeing that that will mean a 180 degree about turn.

Not a grasper, but now a giver.

Not a cheat but a now a truth-liver.

*“The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.”*

The lost. The sinner. The traitor, the promise-breaker, the scum of society, the people others write off, the ones whose lives everyone knows are a mess, the hopeless and the despised. The “bad”

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They are the ones Jesus not only wants to be welcomed to his church, but they are the ones he came to seek for his church.

To make them, like Zaccheus, children of Abraham. A real child of God with trust in God like Abraham.

All of us are just like Zaccheus.

If we really are one of God's people, God's children, like Zaccheus, we don't deserve it.

We never did anything to make God love us and accept us.

*"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*

If we rejoice in the salvation brought by Jesus as we do in every communion service, it's only because we once were "lost".

Someone pointed Anna McGahan to Jesus. And God has now brought her to himself.

She writes, "In my pokey motel room in Melbourne as I read the Gideon Bible, I expected to be reprimanded. Instead I was crowned. The person of Jesus was on my side. He was more than anyone had ever described to me. He was personal. He spoke to *me*.

*I'm yours, he seemed to say. Come and rest.*

Arms were opened to the entire me. All of me. And the man they belonged to had no ulterior motive. He asked no price. There was no "catch".

*The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*

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Is that what we want as well?

How can we not - when we ourselves once were lost, but now are found, were blind, but now we see?

We want to be a church who welcome anyone, like Jesus does, not to remain the same, but to be changed like Zaccheus was.

Like Anna McGahan has been.

Like many of us have been.

By making Jesus our king.

And being transformed to live his way.