

Reading: Luke 19:1-10

A young friend of mine has English grandparents. He had never meant them but he had heard stories about them. He had spoken to them on the phone and he longed to meet them. Then it happened, Granny and Grandad were coming over for the Christmas holidays. The build-up for the family was pretty intense. The house was cleaned from top to toe. Special English food was ordered with lots of potatoes, meat and baked beans. The kids were drilled in what to talk about. They must not mention Brexit or rugby. Then the big day came. Unfortunately my young friend Graeme got overexcited, as you do. Longing and watching for the plane from the viewing platform at Dunedin airport he put his head through the railing. Then try as he might he just couldn't get his head back again.

As the plane was landing, the firemen were called and the jaws of life fired up. The others went to greet Grandad and Granny. After the initial kisses and hugs Granny asked, "Where's our favourite grandson?" "Oh that's him getting his head removed from the balcony," replied Dad and everyone laughed.

We have all had the experience of longing for someone. Whether it's a friend or a relative or a lover. We all know that deep sense of emptiness and the sweet feeling of meeting up again.

Today in our Bible reading we see a small man with a big longing. He is called Zacchaeus. Luke tells us quite a lot about him. He's short, he's the head tax collector and he's corrupt. In our day we just love paying our taxes but in Jesus' day the tax collectors were hated. They always clipped the ticket. Tax collectors were hated because they took bribes and because they collaborated with the occupying army of the Romans.

But deep down Zacchaeus wanted more from life. He longed for meaning in his life, he longed for purpose, he longed for Jesus. Like my little friend who put his dignity aside, Zacchaeus put his social dignity to one side and climbed a tree.

Jesus was going peacefully through Jericho. Jericho was a wonderfully fertile city and one of the world's oldest, it had a tower over 8,000 years old. But Jesus wasn't sightseeing. He saw Zacchaeus up the sycamore tree and, unfazed, invited himself himself to Zacchaeus' house.

This outraged the locals. "Doesn't he know this man is a tax collector? Doesn't Jesus know he's a sinner, doesn't he know he is corrupt?" But Zacchaeus felt his longing being fulfilled. Something stirred in his cold tax collector heart, a longing for justice. "I will give everything back to those I have ripped off and I will give it back four fold," he said. This was well beyond what the Jewish law required. Jesus accepted him as a child of Abraham and proclaimed salvation had come to his house.

But what of us? History is full of people who like Zacchaeus have longed to see Jesus. One of the most famous was a man called Augustine. Growing up he was a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus. He lived a wild and debauched life. But all the time he had this deep longing for Jesus. He was next level bright, in fact he studied every philosophy known to man and some known only to women. But his deep longing was still not satisfied. In the end, following years of praying by his saintly mother, he came to Jesus.

He wrote famously in his diary, "*My God, how I burned with longing to have wings to carry me back to you. O God ever ancient and ever new, my heart was restless until I came to you.*" Augustine went on to become one of the greatest scholars of his day in the 4th century and indeed of western civilization.

I wonder if your heart is restless. I wonder if you have deep seated longing for God. I know I do.

Today just as Jesus called out to Zacchaeus, Jesus is calling us. We need to make the first move because Jesus is gentle and will never force himself on us. Remember that when Zacchaeus climbed that tree to see him Jesus was quick to respond. In the same way Jesus will respond to us quickly today too. We don't need to worry if our lives haven't been up to scratch. Zacchaeus was corrupt sinner, Augustine a notorious sinner. When we finally admit our need of God, purpose and meaning come into our lives.

No one could question the dedication of one Christian. A chaplain of a church school in Auckland. When one of his students was going to die for want of a kidney, he offered his own. Think about that for dedication. He wasn't related to the boy. He subjected himself to both the pain and the danger of the operation and then the risk that sometime down the track he too might have trouble with his one remaining kidney.

Just as it was for Zacchaeus, following Jesus means a commitment to other people's good, not just our own.

Today we long to see Jesus but we don't have to climb a tree or become a saint or give our kidney we just need to open our hearts to the transforming love of God. Jesus will do the rest: he will accept us as children beloved of God, he will come into our homes and lives and give them meaning, purpose and joy.

Let us pray...

O God ever ancient and ever new, we long for you, we long for the love you hold out to each of us.

Our hearts are restless until we come to you.

We each open our hearts to your love today knowing that you welcome us with all that you are, now and forever.

Amen.