

## PENTECOST XXIII

*Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus, but account of the crowd he could not....*

Luke 19:3

I wanted to see Jesus. I really, really did. I wanted to see him more than just about anything. I wanted to find out what he's all about, who he really is.

I'd heard so much about him. I knew lots of people who'd met him, heard him loud and clear. Most of them totally believed what he had to say. And he says some very weird stuff, but that doesn't seem to bother folks.

They get puzzled, even stupefied sometimes. They get offended, and some of them get turned off. And some of them get turned away, because he takes against them.

Still, I was very curious. Even obsessed. I know people whose lives have been turned around by this guy. They've been healed of awful diseases. They've started talking about God a lot, a different God from the one I was brought up with, all rules and judgment, punishment and anger. They talk as if God cares about our lives and loves us and wants us to have a better world.

I knew I could use some of that uplift. Because I'm really, really short. I'm little, and that's been a black cloud and a handicap in my life. People notice big and tall men. They command respect and often fear. I know I'm a joke because of my stature, and I have been all my life. I'm always self-conscious, I always feel one-down, and I've been depressed all my life because I'm such a shrimp.

Plus, that's was going to create a logistical nightmare if I wanted to see Jesus. He always has these crowds pressing around him and trying to touch him and talk to him, and how was I ever going to get a good view?

If I were a different kind of guy, I might have had a friend who could hoist me up on his shoulders. But that's another handicap. I'm a tax collector. One of the despised. One of a class hated and reviled by my fellow Jews. And I don't blame them. We are instruments of oppression, tools of the occupiers. We bleed the poor to fill the coffers of Rome and her minions. I can't really blame people for shunning me.

Plus, I'm very very rich. Very short, very hated, very rich. You'd think the last item might cancel out the first two, but it just makes things worse. Because people resent me all the more for being rich. They think I'm crooked. They assume I'm skimming off their taxes to line my pockets.

And I can't really blame them, because so many tax collectors do just that. I'm guilty by association, tainted with the brush of corruption. Actually, I inherited my money, I came by it honestly. But I can't go around protesting: *I am not a crook*. Who would believe me?

Plus, it probably would make me no better in the eyes of the crowd. However we got our money, the rich are not popular. And really, why should we be? Most of the country is dirt poor. Why should they have any use for us?

Still, it hurts. Because, if I do say so myself, just between you and me, I also give away a lot. I already give away half of what I have to the poor. I have way more than I can ever use myself. And they need it. So why not? It's the least I can do.

I don't go around advertising this, because people might think I was trying to buy favor, buy popularity, buy influence, even buy love. But I know love can't be bought, and the rest of it I'm not so interested in. I wish I were taller. I wish I had more friends. But money can't buy those.

And I know what it means to be hurting. I know what it means to suffer – not like the poor suffer. But I suffer out of loneliness, and I suffer because I am despised, and I despise myself for working for a government I hate. And so I do what I can to help others who are hurting in different ways.

So, very short, very hated, very rich. I figured Jesus would want nothing to do with me. I was definitely not his kind of guy.

But still, I really wanted to see him. And in addition to what I've already told you, I'm also very determined. Stubborn, even. So when I heard he was coming through Jericho one morning, I got up early. I ran way ahead of the crowd. One way or another, I was going to see Jesus, get a really good view of him.

And there, right on the route I knew he would take, was a big, tall, sycamore tree. An opportunity sent by God. So I climbed right up it! Did I mention I'm kind of impulsive? And also inventive? If you're short you have to improvise a lot, and if you're a pariah you have to do it on your own.

So along comes the crowd, and along comes Jesus. And I could see, even way up in that tree, that he had a magnetism about him. A charisma. He wasn't all *that* tall, but he had a commanding presence.

Just as I'd thought, people were clamoring all around him, pushing and shoving just to get close, to touch him or just to touch his garments. It was a real crush, and I

would have been stomped underfoot if I'd been down there. They were all trying to catch just a few words of what he was saying, since he was talking all the time as he marched along.

And then, the most amazing thing happened. He stopped short, right under my tree. All the people behind him bumped into him and one another, and it was a real scrum down there. But he paid no attention to that. Nope.

He looked right up at me, ridiculous up there in my tree. And he called me by name. *Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down, he commanded. I must stay at your house today.*

*My house! My house!* Of all the houses in Jericho, my house!

So I scrambled down from that tree in a hurry, I can tell you. In fact, I fell the last 10 feet or so, and sprained my ankle pretty bad.

But I was so excited I didn't feel the pain. I rushed on home. I had plenty to do to get ready.

I can tell you, coming to my house was not a popular move on Jesus' part. There was plenty of grumbling over that. *Why him?* they demanded. *A tax collector, a leech, a sinner. Why is Jesus accepting his hospitality? What is this?*

But I didn't care. I just got a good meal ready for Jesus and his little band of disciples. And when they came, and when Jesus and I talked privately, I did tell him of my practice of giving away half my wealth each year to the poor. I also pledged that if I learned I had cheated anybody, I'd pay them back four-fold.

He didn't respond directly. He didn't pat me on the back or anything. He just said something quite mysterious, but also unfathomably wonderful. He said, *Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.*

What did he mean by that? I ask you. I didn't understand at the time, and I don't fully understand now. I know my life is very different now. I have some friends, other people who have met Jesus and been touched by him and have learned to love him and call themselves his followers. We get together and talk about him, what he says, what it means to us to have him in our lives. We pray together, we care for one another, and we care for one another in times of need and celebrate together in times of joy. We do this because of him, and we think he would be glad.

But my life has changed even more on the inside. I know the change will keep deepening until I die, and I know that I will spend all that time figuring out and understanding what Jesus meant when he said *salvation has come to this house* .

I *can* tell you what I've learned for sure.

Short? Not a problem

Sinner? Not a problem

Rich? Not a problem

Generous? My generosity turned my world upside down.

Alleluia! Amen.