

Meeting the Christ on the margins

Luke 19:1-10

30 October 2016

Twenty-something years ago, I was at a weekend meeting a few miles out of Taupo. When we had finished our business for the Saturday, a few of us drove into town to have a look around, and at some point, I left the others, so I could patronise one of the local watering holes.

I soon found a suitably convivial public bar. Public bars don't exist anymore, but back in the day, they were my preferred category of licensed premises. Not only was the beer cheaper than in lounge bars, but the clientele was far more interesting.

I was sitting at a table by myself, thinking about life, the universe, and everything, when three patch wearing members of one of the largest gangs in the country came sauntering into the bar. And without being invited, they all came and sat down at my table, which suddenly felt very crowded. I quickly worked out which one was the leader of the trio, and to my great surprise I saw he was upset. Very upset. Members of this particular gang were expected to be staunch at all times, and to show any emotion was construed as weakness.

He then began to tell me what was troubling him. I am not going to breach his confidence by telling you what he told me, other than to say he did not confess to a really serious crime or anything like that. But he was greatly troubled by something, and needed to talk to somebody about it. I don't know why he chose me, but looking back, I am glad he did, because I now realise it was a tremendous privilege to have been chosen to share the pain of one whose

membership of a group that rejected the norms of society meant he was rejected by society himself. I listened as best I could. All these years later, I don't actually remember what I said to him. I think I mainly listened and did not say very much. I don't think we even exchanged names.

When we had had finished our conversation, he stood up, shook my hand, bought me a beer, and he and the others left as quickly as they had arrived, leaving me sitting in stunned silence, wondering whether this had really happened, or I whether I had been imagining it all.

I didn't know what it was at the time, but something happened during our conversation that brought peace to that man. I often wonder what became of him, and even though I did not associate with any church, or identify as a follower of Jesus, back then, I now know he experienced something of the peace that comes from the Christ when he gave up his burden in my presence.

I was reminded of this incident while I was contemplating today's gospel reading, in which Zaccheus, a corrupt and unpopular tax collector, wanted to see Jesus, but Jesus called him out first, much to the displeasure of the other citizens. And we can get their outrage. Most of them would have been people who probably did their best to be good citizens, but Jesus chose to stay with possibly the most crooked person in town. Jesus had been rejected by the religious authorities of his day. But he had found acceptance among the most marginalised members of society, because he was not afraid to mix with those whom the rest of society rejected. Such as Zaccheus.

If we consolidate Jesus' core teachings, he gave us two simple commandments: to love God, and to love others. In the Older Testament, these two commandments are in completely separate books of the Law. It took Jesus to bring them together. And I would argue that these two are so powerfully linked that it is by showing our love for others that we show our love for God.

My definition of Christian ministry is revealing the Christ in word and action. But for people to see the Christ in us, we must see Christ in them. And having compassion for society's most rejected and despised people is a powerful demonstration that unconditional love really is available to everyone. Every person the world seems to have forgotten is a person who deserves to be loved and respected.

But wait. There's more. Not only do we reveal the Christ to others through our words and actions, the Christ can also be revealed to us through others. And I think this may have been what Jesus was alluding to this when he taught that when we give food to the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit prisoners, we do it for him.¹

While I have learned much from some wonderful people in the Church, and at the theological institute where I studied, it has been my interactions with others that have taught me the most about the practical aspects of my discipleship. And I have learned the most from people on what have been described as the margins of society, or, to put that in the parlance of the diocese, the lost, the last, and the least.

Such as my friend Marvin. He has arguably the most positive attitude of anybody I have ever known. His faith is tremendous, and his knowledge of scripture has put me to shame at times. And it would be difficult to think of anybody else who has inspired me on my walk with the Christ as much as he has. Yet Marvin is a prisoner on death row on Ohio.

Then there is the conversation I once had with a friend about the Letter of James, which is one of my favourite books of the Bible. And James took on a whole new significance for me after my friend, who had just read it, told me what it said to her. She was in hospital, because several days earlier she had been detained under the Mental Health (Compulsory Assessment and Treatment) Act 1992.

And then, of course, there was that day in Taupo twenty-something years ago, when a staunch gang member let down his guard, exposed his vulnerability, and revealed himself to have been created in God's image like the rest of us. Just like Zaccheus had done in Jericho nearly two thousand years earlier.

We are called to reveal the Christ to the lost, the last and the least. And through them, the Christ can also be revealed to us.

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¹ Matthew 25:24-40