

Sermon 2 November 2025 Conversion to God

James 4:7-12 Luke 19:1-10

You would all be familiar with that wonderful hymn, 'Amazing Grace,' which we will be singing a little later on. Some of you might also be familiar with the story behind the man, John Newton, who wrote those magnificent words. As a young man, Newton had been press-ganged into serving on a slave ship and had risen to the rank of captain. His dramatic experience of God during a storm at sea opened the way to his conversion and triggered a slow but extraordinary transformation, which led first to his joining the ranks of clergy and then, many years later, a campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade.

This transformation was far from instantaneous, however, and following his naval career he became a tax collector. Today's gospel reading tells us about another tax collector who is changed by his encounter with Jesus. Zacchaeus is not just a run-of-the-mill tax official for the Romans, he is a superintendent. At the time of Jesus, Palestine was under the rule of the Romans. The job of the tax collector was to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans. This in itself meant that they were not the most popular guys on the block, but exacerbating this antagonistic feeling towards them was the fact that invariably they were not the most honest of citizens and their *modus operandi* was geared towards ripping off the good Jewish people. We alluded to this last week in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Zacchaeus is very much part of this dodgy system and has successfully lined his pockets as a result. He is a sinner in the truest sense of the word. But he saw the light. In the words of John Newton, 'I was blind but now I see.' He makes a public confession of his guilt: *'Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"'* Luke 19:8. Last week we spoke about how in acknowledging our mistakes and faults, we are then in a position to draw close to God. It does require a degree of humility. J C Ryle, writer, said, *'The surest mark of true conversion is humility.'* I quote from our first reading, *'Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.'* James 4:10.

Zacchaeus humbles himself and at the same time announces that he will give half his possessions to charity and repay anyone he has defrauded four times over. What a transformation! What a testament to what the presence of Christ in your life can do. Zacchaeus encounters Christ and in an instant his life changes. Let share another story of transformation.

One of the pioneers of prison reform in the United States was a converted criminal named Starr Daily. The story behind Daily's conversion is amazing. When Daily was sentenced to prison for the third time in his life, the judge said to him, 'More punishment is not what you need, but I don't know what else to do in your case. Our helplessness is your hopelessness.'

During Daily's third stay in prison, his behaviour became so bad that he ended up in solitary confinement, a small cell known as 'the hole.' One day, a remarkable thing happened to him. As Daily lay on the ice-cold floor of 'the hole,' a strange thought crossed his mind. He had always been a dynamo of power and energy. Suddenly, he began to wonder what would have happened to him had he used his power and energy for good rather than for evil. The thought completely boggled his mind. For a long time, he just lay there thinking about it.

What happened next is hard to describe. Daily began to dream disconnected dreams of Jesus Christ. Jesus seemed to be there at his side, looking deep into his eyes, as if he were trying to enter his soul. Daily was overcome with an intense feeling of love. Then all the people Daily had hurt in his life seemed to parade through his mind. And as they did, Daily felt a surge of love for them, which seemed to heal their hurts.

That experience changed Daily completely. Before the experience, Daily was a hardened criminal, filled with hate. After it, he was a new man, filled with love.

Eventually, Daily was released from jail and began a career of speaking and writing to promote prison reform. Commenting on Daily's remarkable conversion, Peter Marshall, a well-known chaplain, said, 'Starr Daily is the best living proof I've ever seen that a new creature in Jesus Christ is not just the old man patched up but an altogether new man.'

The story of Starr Daily bears a striking resemblance to the story of Zacchaeus in today's gospel. Both men were living bad lives. Both men encountered Christ. Both men were remarkably transformed by that encounter. Both men acknowledged the sins of their past and their lives took off in an entirely new direction.

So how does that relate to us? I want to answer that question with two brief and related responses. Firstly, each and every one of us has a soul. That is actually part of being human, and that part is God. When we were created, God implanted something of himself in each one of us. Genesis 1:27: *'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'* Now, when we reach within ourselves, when we open ourselves to that presence, when we tap into that presence, our life takes on a new dimension. Centuries ago, St Augustine wrote, *'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.'*

Sometimes, that encounter, that discovery happens as a result of us reaching out. In the case of Zacchaeus, that was definitely the case. He reached out to Jesus and he was changed. But sometimes, that discovery creeps up on us and takes us by surprise. That was definitely the case with Starr Daily.

However it happens, it is transformative, which leads me on to the second response. This transformation is always, always a positive, believe it or not. I guess that is a given but the point I want to make is that this relationship with God, with Christ, whether it is newly discovered or has been in place for a while, leads us to be better people and invariably is the catalyst for a willingness and a desire to make a difference in the lives of others. John Newton, Starr Daily and Zacchaeus himself are examples.

I want to finish by making another point. If we believe that God is part of every one of us, then we need to be mindful of that as we interact with anyone and everyone. What do I mean by that? Simply this, when we hurt someone, and we are all guilty of that to some degree, we are hurting God. God is part of that person. If we can bring ourselves to look at it in this light, it does bring a different perspective to the situation, whatever that situation might be.

And closely aligned with that, we believe that God made us all in his image (I have already referred to the verse from Genesis which states that). We look around this church and beyond – we are all very different. That tells me that God is different, and that we need to be careful about judging others purely because they are different to us. On the contrary, by embracing those differences, we are embracing God. Or perhaps we could look at it like this – by judging others due to them being different to us, perhaps we are judging God.

Does that make sense? Let me just leave it at that for now, because we could spend a couple of hours unpicking and exploring the ramifications and intricacies of that statement.