

Have you ever met anyone interesting on the street? Having lived in central London for a while and working next to the BBC I occasionally saw well known people but of course never said anything to them.

However one day I was walking along Weymouth Street and saw Michael Foot, who had been leader of the Labour Party, coming towards me and as we passed I simply said "Good morning Mr Foot," and he replied good morning and we went on our way. I'm sure he's never told the story saying I met that Ian Bentley on the street.

It was a passing encounter of no consequence at all because there was no relationship between us.

Well this morning we see an encounter on a street which did have a consequence.

Jesus as we see in v1 was passing through Jericho this town on the edge of the Jordan en route to Jerusalem. His presence attracted a crowd and among that crowd, probably going about his daily business, was a man named Zacchaeus. He is summed up for us by Luke in five words, "chief tax collector and wealthy". That was him. The description along with the rest of the story helps us to see two issues for Zacchaeus. The first was that being a tax collector and working for the Roman occupiers meant he was ostracised from Jewish society. He probably was short on friends. But we also see he was wealthy. If you had asked Zacchaeus that morning what was his goal in life then he would have said making money. That was what he lived for even though he was wealthy. He probably had a very nice house with a top of the range car in the drive with leather reins, new upholstery and alloy wheels. He had money and that was what he lived for at least until this day. Then came the encounter between the two.

1. A vague interest

It began with a vague interest. Zacchaeus was going about his business. There's a bit of noise a bit of a crowd and his natural curiosity made him gravitate towards what was going on. I'm sure you've done it, joined a crowd round someone selling stuff or a street - that's Zacchaeus here.

He had a vague interest. He wanted to have a look at this Jesus. That may describe some of us here this morning whether we come here regularly or have been invited by a friend, we have a vague interest in Jesus. We wonder what he was like. We might have liked to have met him.

So Zacchaeus thought it might be interesting to get a look at Jesus. However, being on the short side he couldn't see. So he looked around for a vantage point, saw the sycamore tree and shinned up it. It had the advantage that he could see but not be seen because people don't look up do they? As people move round a town or city they keep their eyes either level or on the floor but people don't look up.

Zacchaeus was safe. Perhaps that is how some of us want it to be.

I do find it interesting watching people come into church and please I'm not wanting to be rude or personal here, but in different churches I have noted that the person who may be new to church or may be a little uncertain about the whole thing will tend to sit at the side and certainly towards the back. It is our version of being up the tree. I'm more out of sight if I'm in the back corner.

Can I just say that with this minister at least you are safe in the centre of the middle row because I struggle to see beyond the front couple of rows!

But I hope you can see what I mean for some of us we just want to keep Jesus and this church thing a bit at arms length until we are sure about it all.

So Zacchaeus went up the tree because people don't look up,

2. Jesus initiates a friendship

but Jesus did and he did more than that, v5, "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Jesus didn't just pass Zacchaeus and say nothing as he had with the rest of the crowd. No he stopped made eye contact and spoke and what he said was the beginnings of a relationship.

There are two parts to it. Firstly he called Zacchaeus to him. It may seem a bit odd that Jesus should stop and call a random person by name to come to him. But that is how Jesus works by calling people by name to come to him and to become his followers. Back in Luke 5 it had happened to the fisherman Simon Peter and to another tax collector Matthew, here to Zacchaeus and down the centuries to many men and woman.

This is what Jesus does – he initiates friendships between him and us by calling us to him.

I would be very surprised if today Jesus is not calling someone here by name. He is saying come out of that place where you are trying to hide and come to me, become my follower. Is it you he is calling by name? He knows each of us and his great desire is that we come to him. As we see from v10 that was why he came to earth to seek and save those who were lost that is those who through their sin were separated from God and lost to God to draw them back. Is it you he is calling today?

But that was not all for then secondly he said, "I must stay at your house." Now that's not normal in a street meeting. I certainly didn't say anything like that to Michael Foot.

But what Jesus was saying to Zacchaeus was that he wanted to be part of his life. He wanted a friendship with him. This encounter was a starting point but Jesus was making clear in what he asked that he wanted more than that.

If we think about it in human terms a pattern of friendship development might be something like this.

Stage 1: Acquaintance: someone we meet and have superficial contact with.

Stage 2: Friendly relations: The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice.

Stage 3: Help and encouragement: At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement or to whom we offer

Stage 4: Intimacy/empathy: the give comfort and support becomes more intimate and there is an emotional sharing and bonding.

Stage 5: The sure shelter: at this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity and unconditional acceptance. As a 12 year old described it: "A real friend is a place you go when you need to take off the masks. You can say what you want to your friend because you know that your friend will really listen and even if he doesn't like what you say, he will still like you. "

Just for a moment think of these stages and ask where you are at in your relationship with Jesus. For some of us here this morning we may not want to be any closer to Jesus than we are – we may still want to view him from behind the leaves of the tree. But please do recognise that what

Jesus wants for us is to be growing in a relationship with him.

He doesn't want us keeping him at arms length or to be a vague acquaintance. Nor does he want to be someone we speak to every so often or just someone we look to for help when we are in trouble. He wants to be someone with whom we can share the deepest things of our lives. He wants to be our sure shelter.

Earlier we heard various stories of what God is doing in people's lives here is one more:

"The evening when I got home, I was upset that CYE was over for another year and my parents were out, so I decided to chat to God, something I'd never really done before. I mean, I'd prayed before, but I always thought you had to use fancy words and sound all posh, I'd never tried just chatting. I sat with my eyes open and talked out loud to God. I told him about CYE, what I'd learnt about him. It was the most amazing feeling and I really knew that he was listening. I told God that I wanted to really know him now, that I wanted to talk to him like this more and that I wanted him to be my friend, not just my God. I had tears running down my face and I don't know how long I sat there but I felt so happy and alive, I felt refreshed and relieved to have found what I didn't even realise was missing."

That was part of Lorna Randall's testimony from her baptism earlier this year and is what I'm talking about. It is about growing in a friendship with Jesus, letting him into the house of our lives.

So there they are on the street Jesus has initiated a contact with Zacchaeus but how will he respond?

It takes me back to September 1972. I know most of you weren't even alive then but I was and I was walking along a street in Ealing. Two men came up to me and asked me if I wanted to go a service in their church that evening. It was an encounter on the street with two guys I'd never met before but when I responded in a positive manner it led me to a real encounter with Jesus.

3. Zacchaeus' response

Zacchaeus also responded positively in two ways.

Firstly v6 he welcomed Jesus gladly. If we put it in today's words he believed in Jesus. Here is the point at which he came to faith, was saved, however you want to put. Jesus came and called him to follow and Zacchaeus responded and did so gladly. But secondly there was an act of repentance v8, "Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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."

After that he was not going to be wealthy!

Money had been his god and now he was turning his back on it. That which had got in the way of his relationship with God was being removed. He was having a change of mind – that is repentance. He didn't give everything away. He still needed money to live but he no longer lived for money but for Jesus because he saw Jesus as much better than all the money in the world.

It is a response that has been echoed down the centuries by many ordinary men and women who, hearing Jesus call and understanding him as God, have recognised that to know, love and serve him is more important than anything in the world.

4. Jesus' summary

How did Jesus sum up all that had happened in this short encounter? v9 he said, "Today salvation has come to this house." That is today in these moments Zacchaeus has begun a new relationship with me and, as we saw earlier from v10 that was the primary reason for Jesus, the son of God coming into this world.

This brief encounter on a street led Zacchaeus to make a fresh start and a new beginning with Jesus.

Perhaps today is the day for someone here to make that new beginning a fresh start. You may have tried church before you may have been coming here for months or years but you have never really done what Zacchaeus did and received Jesus gladly and turned away from the things that are holding you back. If so please don't put it off. At the end of the service speak to me or to a friend here. I am happy to talk with answer questions explain a bit more or just to give you a small booklet.

But also you may have made that beginning months or years back but as you look at your friendship with Jesus know that it is not where he wants it to be or where you want it to be. If so again don't just walk away. God is speaking to you. Again why not talk it through with a friend or come forward and pray with the people doing prayer ministry this morning.

We see here an amazing encounter and turn around in the life of Zacchaeus. Jesus knew him called him to a new friendship and Zacchaeus responded.

Jesus knows us and wants each of us to be in a growing and fruitful relationship with him. He knows us and calls us either to a new or a deeper friendship with him.