Where would we be without Luke’s gospel?

We have four gospels in the bible. Gospel means ‘good News’ and that means we have four different accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. Together they give us pretty well the only picture we have of Jesus, and together they reveal how he was and is and always shall be good news for us and for our world.

But sometimes I wonder, where would we be without Luke’s gospel? Imagine Christmas with no shepherds, no angel Gabriel or annunciation to Mary. They are only recorded by Luke. And there would be no visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. And so no Magnificat at Evensong, or Nunc Dimittis or Benedictus for that matter for all come from St Luke. And no picture of the young mother Mary, ‘pondering these things in her heart.’

And then what about the parables, the rich teaching we would never have known if it hadn’t been for Luke, and his special concern not just for women and especially Mary’s perspective on events, but for the lost, the lonely, for gentiles and all who feel shut out of society.

Only Luke includes the story of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the lost sheep and the lost coin. And then there are the stories of Jesus healing and speaking with people. Jesus being good news for people as he also proclaimed the gospel from town to town. Only Luke has Jesus coming to the woman at Nain who had lost absolutely everything, and bringing her new life. Only Luke records Jesus travelling to the country of the Gerasenes, Jordan today, where he heals a madman, or the pagan centurion in whom Jesus finds more faith than in all the house of Israel, reminding us that faith is not the preserve of orthodox believers but can be found in strange places and unlikely people. Only Luke has Jesus’ words from the cross, ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do.’ And only Luke has the exchange with the two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus. One mocks him, but the other says, ‘Jesus, remember me when you
come into your kingdom.’ And out of his own pain and isolation Luke has Jesus reply in words filled with pardon and peace, ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Where indeed would we be without St Luke and his wonderful gospel, full of stories and sayings from Jesus that have brought such hope, healing and salvation to countless people across every generation.

And today’s passage is no exception. The story of Zaccheus in Luke Chapter 19.

Zaccheus was an outcast for two main reasons. Firstly, because he was a tax-collector.

There is nothing wrong with that per se. Some of my best friends are tax collectors. Paying tax in our democratic society is an honourable thing to do. It’s the way we join together as citizens to pay for the things we value but couldn’t provide on our own, such as schools, healthcare and sanitation. Perhaps we need to be prepared to pay more tax to fund things well like social care for the elderly, but still, paying tax should be a good thing and should benefit all of society. Tax collectors generally go after people who could and should be paying more, but are trying to avoid doing so. They are doing an honourable job in our society today.

However, Zaccheus was doing quite a different job. Israel in Jesus day was certainly not a democracy. The state was ruled over by the Herod dynasty, who could steal people and property at will. Their power was limited by the Romans, the real power behind the Herods’ throne. The Romans had conquered Israel, which they re-named Palestine. They ruled over it with an iron rod, keeping order perhaps, but at great expense. One way they paid for the occupying armies, and sent money back to Rome, was by raising high levels of tax from the local population. To raise it they employed local people to go from house to house collecting it in. As you can imagine these people, collaborators with the foreign regime, were very unpopular. To make matters worse the Romans didn’t pay them any kind of salary. They were expected to use their position to extort two, three or four times more than they needed to, keeping the extra for themselves. It was a clever move. The tax collectors themselves drew most of the anger about taxes, deflecting it from the Roman occupiers. At the same time, they couldn’t get soft in their job as otherwise they would have nothing to live on. Many grew very rich indeed. Zaccheus of Jericho was one of those people. Rich and hated at the same time.

The second reason Zaccheus was looked down on, literally, was because he was so short. We know he was a very short man because when Jesus rode into Jericho, Zaccheus had to
climb up a sycamore tree to get a view, otherwise he wouldn’t see anything at all through the crowd.

But as so often in gospel crowd scenes, Jesus stops and is aware of an individual’s need. The woman who touches the hem of his cloak was one. ‘Who was it that touched me’ Jesus says, though the disciples think he is crazy as people were crushing and grabbing at him from every side.

And now it is Zaccheus. Jesus has the ability to sense a soul’s need of him. He looks up and sees Zaccheus. He doesn’t challenge him or embarrass him. He does the one thing the crowd would least expect, the one thing that would signal acceptance and forgiveness without having to say those words at all. Jesus invites himself round for tea. When forgiveness and new life is at stake there is no time to lose. It’s now or never as Jesus says, ‘Zaccheus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ Grace and forgiveness from Jesus are freely offered to a person he somehow already seems to know by name. The naming is part of the grace in this tale. He is no longer a category, an object, but a son of Abraham as Jesus say, he too is a child of God. And in this story repentance comes after forgiveness, not the other way round. And it’s repentance at its most tangible and fruitful as God’s grace unlocks not just Zaccheus heart, but his wallet as well.

‘Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’

A tale of social isolation overcome through God’s free love in Jesus. A tale of forgiveness unlocking repentance, not the other way round. A tale of the unlocking of the heart and wallet together as generosity and grace know no bounds, and the unlocking of the closed minds of the crowd and us the readers, as we see the man no longer as an object, a tax collector. But as a person, Zaccheus, and a child of God.

Where would we be without St Luke and his glorious gospel?!