

Congregational story time: *Who are your heroes? Who are saints for you?*
What about Zac who climbed a tree to see Jesus?

Reflection: YOU ARE SAINTS OF GOD

- *Zaccheus experienced rejection, but discovered repentance and restoration*
 - *stamped, sealed and guaranteed by the Spirit.* Ephesians 1: 13 - 14
 - *consistency of faith and works means that the story of faith and witness continues through you*
- Readings:** Luke 19: 1 – 10, 2 Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12.

What makes a saint? Saints are not just those who have been recognised as such by the Catholic Church. The saints are all who follow Jesus and live God's way. So what makes a saint is a determination to follow Jesus and live a life of love and compassion for all. Obedience to that great commandment to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love those around you – your neighbours.

Living God's way, helping God's kingdom to grow and be visible to all, is about the whole of our lives – the way we live every day, everything we do - by caring for people, and for the earth and all that is in it. The faith and actions of many who have gone before us can inspire us - even the actions of someone like Zaccheus.

When we first meet Zaccheus, no-one seems to have any good things to say about him. He is described as a thief, a cheat, someone who had done a deal with the Roman overlords, betraying his own people and making a hefty profit in the process. He employed a gang of thugs who collected a crooked kind of tax, like GST, but they managed to collect extra for themselves and for Zaccheus, the chief tax collector in Jericho.

Jericho was a city steeped in the history of Israel. It had a rich heritage but was, in the time of Jesus and Zaccheus, a city permeated by greed and unfairness and suffered a real lack of good leadership.

Zaccheus was one of the leaders – a crooked unfair one. To make matters worse Zaccheus was a very short man. In those days people believed that if a man was very short it was a sign that God did not think much of him – so they didn't think much of him either.

Jesus and his disciples had been travelling a wandering route to Jerusalem from Galilee, through Samaria and then east towards Jericho. People had heard about Jesus and were keen to meet him along the way. Zaccheus was one of those who wanted to see Jesus. Yet no-one in the crowd would let him through – after what he had done, cheating people and collecting extra tax for himself, why would they? - but Zaccheus did not give up. He ran as fast as his little legs would carry him, until he came to a tall tree with low branches, along the side of the road where Jesus would be walking. Zaccheus climbed up the tree and waited to see Jesus passing by.

But Jesus did not pass by. He stopped right under the tree. It looked to the crowd as though he was meeting someone there. Jesus looked up into the branches and called Zaccheus by name. Zaccheus would be surprised that Jesus noticed him and even more surprised that Jesus knew his name. But what Jesus said next would have been an even greater surprise - Jesus told Zaccheus to come down because he was coming to visit him that day. That was a sign of acceptance that overthrew all Zaccheus' experience of

rejection. He had never before tasted acceptance or forgiveness without buying it. Now Jesus was greeting him and coming to his house.

The crowd could not believe their eyes and ears. They saw Jesus being tainted by entering the house of corrupt Zaccheus. They muttered and grumbled about Jesus just as they muttered and grumbled about Zaccheus. Yet the truth was even more outrageous than they imagined. It wasn't that Zaccheus' brokenness was tainting and corrupting Jesus, instead Jesus' wholeness, healing and goodness was transforming Zaccheus. A miraculous exchange was taking place. We don't have a record of the conversation during that meal but we can be sure that it changed Zaccheus' life.

After their meal together, Zaccheus stood up from the table and promised to give half of all he owned to the poor and to give back four times the amount he had taken from people. Jesus said *Salvation has come to stay at your place today. You are an open book before God and people, balanced and beautiful.* Turning to the others he continued *For Zaccheus like all of us, is part of God's family. He is one of Abraham's blessed sons. This is what I came to do – to go after the missing one and bring them back, to find and free everyone and everything that is lost.*

Zaccheus had been lost and rejected. His way of living had separated him from God – but he discovered the power of repentance and restoration. Did you know that the name Zaccheus actually means Innocent One? I find that fascinating because the transformation in his life changed a man who had been lost, and far from God, focused on himself and his wealth, to someone whose actions were compassionate and healing. He was able to live up to his name and in the power of God, become the innocent one.

Just like Zaccheus, we are all part of the family of God. Yet sometimes there are things that separate us from a loving God and we need to recognise them and put them aside and live God's way. The reading we heard from 2 Thessalonians applies to all of us, with its prayer that God may make us all worthy of the life we have been called to live. Ephesians 1: 13 – 14 could also have been written about Zaccheus and us, as well as all those who are saints of God: *God put a stamp of ownership on you by giving you the promised Holy Spirit. This is your seal and guarantee that you are part of God's family and live in God's freedom.*

God sometimes comes into our lives in unexpected ways, just like Jesus stopped under the tree and came to Zaccheus' house. Jesus said to Zaccheus *I must be a guest at your house today.* God wants to be involved in our lives every day, to help us live a life of consistent faith and witness so that God's story continues through us as we show love and compassion to all. Whoever we are, whatever our background we are saints of God together. God welcomes and values us all. God changes our lives for the better.

*There is an old story about changed lives that goes back to the third century. You will find a summary printed on the service sheet. **A changed life:***

Origen, a Christian in the third century AD, talked with a pagan who said that Jesus was followed by "the rag, tag and bobtail of humanity". Origen acknowledged that Jesus called those who were down and beaten by life. He said *"But Jesus does not leave them that way. He fashions people of strength, giving them back self-respect, enabling them to stand on their feet ... they were cowed, cringing, broken things but God has set them free."*

God heals your brokenness. God has set you free. Go live in that freedom. Be a saint by living God's way. God bless you. Amen.