**30th October 2022**

Every day we meet with God,
but Sunday is a special day and this is a special place.
So, we gather for our special meeting with God in Jesus,
in excited expectation that our lives will be enriched,
and that we will journey into the week ahead
as changed and ever-changing people.



**A gathering prayer**

God of friendship,
you are our life’s companion –
a guest in our homes
and our host in this place and all the world.
May we always be eager for your company
and, as we meet you here today,
may we be open to your transforming presence.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

We come to you, O Lord:
you who call us by name.
May we encounter you today
and, in doing so, be transformed
in how we see you,
in how we see others,
in how we see ourselves.
In your name we pray.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

All-forgiving, all-loving God,
we worship you today.
We acknowledge your greatness,
confessing we cannot understand your ways –
but we know that they are wonderful.
We bring you all our praise,
joining our voices with your children around the world,
lifting our hearts and faces to you.
You, God of our lives, our hearts, our world,
we bless your name today.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Gracious Lord, who sees all,
you know all that we hide in our hearts.
We lay before you all the things
that dishonour you and us,
acknowledging the damage they cause.
We turn from hate and greed and pride.
We ask that you would restore us and renew us,
transforming our lives by the words and actions of your Son, Jesus,
and cleansing us with your Holy Spirit,
through whom you make your home in us.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

The God who called us, calls us still:
cleansing our hearts and renewing our minds.
We delight in knowing that we are forgiven,
that we can turn away from wrongdoing,
that we can start afresh today.
In God’s great love, we choose to live differently.
For Jesus’ sake,
**Amen.**



**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Jesus, thank you that you want to meet with us;
that you want us to know you.
Thank you for your willingness
to step into the messiness of our lives,
to console us, change us, and celebrate with us,
whatever the season or circumstance.
Thank you for challenging us to live differently,
for modelling integrity and love,
and for your indwelling Spirit
who makes transformation possible.
Thank you, Lord, you are worthy of all our praise;
may our lives proclaim your glory and tell your story,
now and for ever.
**Amen.**



**Focus Scripture: Luke 19:1–10**

On Friday we were on a beach at Charmouth in Dorset, the famous Jurassic Coast. We didn’t find any fossils before you ask. My own kids would say I’m a fossil now anyway.

But as we came off the beach we noticed a young girl about five years old standing on her own.. Debbie went up to her and said ‘are you OK? Do you have any grown ups with you? Have you lost them? ‘They’re over there she said pointing into the distance. Reassured we moved on to our car.

It's a parents nightmare to get separated from your child and for the child to get lost.

There was a little boy who got separated from his parents in a large shopping center. The Security Department quickly located the child, and took him to an office while the frantic parents were paged over the public address. One of the security guards got a large ice cream cone for the boy, so when his parents arrived at the office, there was their little son happily eating his ice cream. Suddenly, as his parents embraced him, the child burst into tears. One of the security guards said, "Gosh, I guess he didn't know he was lost until he was found!"

The story of Zaccheus, our bible passage for today, is the story of someone who was lost but was found.

In many ways it echoes the famous parable of the Prodigal son who left his family , squandered his wealth on wine women and song and then came back home with his tail between his legs but , unexpectedly, found the warm embrace of his father waiting for him. He was lost but found.

As Louie and Penny and Harry start out in life we hope and pray they will never be lost. Certainly not like the little boy separated from his parents in the shopping centre. But also may they not be lost in other ways, emotional and spiritual.

There are many who are bored, burned out, lonely and empty. Many people have tried to substitute good relationships for the accumulation of things, but no matter how much they get, something is still missing in life. Their pipe does not go down deep enough to draw living water, and they feel lost.

Some people feel life has no purpose or direction. Where is there meaning for life – is this all there is?

Some head off into pleasure – sex drugs and rock and roll. Maybe like Mick Jagger – they can’t get no satisfaction.

Your job as parents is to help steer your children in a good way, to surround them with unconditional love and give them the best foundations for a life that doesn’t lose its way.

You have pledged today to encourage your children to be open the Christian way.

I remember listening to a top Children’s Psychologist a few years ago speak about the benefits of bringing a child up in the church. She said there are very few environments in todays society where all ages meet together with a diversity of views and outlooks on life. That is incredibly positive for forming well rounded empathetic individuals who care for others and understand different points of views. In our lonely society where people often connect only virtually and digitally – in church you meet and interact with real people – people who are there for you when you are down and lost and broken. People you can share life with, its joys and sorrows. Like any community – what you get out of it depends what you put into it.

In church your child gets the chance of being able to speak and even perform in front of others – great for self esteem and confidence.

Churches, at least the mainstream ones, also encourage open critical thinking and advanced thinking, being able to cope with analogical, parabolic and metaphorical and metaphysical language. They encourage deep thinking about life’s big questions, such as what are we here for? What is the good life and how to do achieve it? As well of course as encouraging your own spirituality – your relationship and understanding of God, finding hope, answers to life’s big questions: is there a God? Is there life after death? Can you find forgiveness and hearing?

And at this church we are committed to making sure there is no discrimination, that it is safe space and all people are included.

I believe church can be great for bringing up children and helping them find their way in life.

Zacchaeus was curious about Jesus and desperately wanted to see him and find out more.

Zacchaeus was a Jew but he worked for the Romans as a tax collector, and he was about as popular as city bankers. In those days tax collectors gathered their funds with a little help from the Roman Army, and when Rome's needs were met, they could collect as much as their ingenuity permitted. Zacchaeus may have been small of stature, but he was a "big man" among the tax collectors. In fact, he was a "chief tax collector." He therefore probably had a big home in Jericho, a very comfortable life, and although he had more enemies than friends, Zacchaeus outwardly appeared very successful. But meeting Jesus transformed his life.

Jesus comes to the home of a despised chief tax collector who, in a fit of contrition, vows to give away half of his wealth and exceed the requirements of the law for restitution – If I’ve cheated anyone I’ll pay back four times the amount.

I am sure many city bankers live good generous lives and its surely wrong to make blanket judgements about people, particularly rich people who may, like Zacchaeus, live generous lives living justly according to the requirements of their day.

But Zacchaeus is an outcast, marginalized and cut off from the wider community and as such he is ‘lost’. When we are first introduced to Zacchaeus (vv.2-3) we are told of his real desire to see Jesus. He is the embodiment of a sinner. His repentance (sacrifice?) – ‘I will pay back four times as much’ (v.8) – comes at a real personal cost. But note this is a direct response to Jesus speaking to him. Having encountered Jesus, Zacchaeus knows he must change and that his life must be different. The change in his life reveals the truth of his newfound faith.

I’d encourage anyone to follow the way of Jesus. I was baptized as a baby back in 1966 – I apparently cried all the way through the ceremony.

I came to be a Jesus follower reluctantly and fearfully at the tender age of 16. I wouldn’t describe myself as lost. Nor as a great sinner. But I was an impressionable teenager. Like most teenagers I didn’t find church cool. Which self-respecting teenager finds church cool? You could argue that church shouldn’t be cool. Because Jesus was all about the lost. The ones who didn’t fit in, the ones no one else could bother about, the losers of society, the ones who didn’t have it all, didn’t have the looks or the wealth or the status. If your church is ‘cool’ then perhaps you are not truly following Jesus?

The relationship between style and substance is an interesting debate. Politicians like sound bites, put on the style, but don’t always deliver. Where is the substance? Most people are wooed by style and then disappointed with the substance. But that is not to say we should neglect style. We don’t’ have to go out of our way to look weird and out of date.

As a teenager I found church boring and irrelevant and untrue. But I kept going to the church youth club. That’s where I met a girl. You see it was the hormones that got me to Jesus. This girl had just become a Christian, which was news to me as I thought we were all Christians having been born in a Christian country (this was the early 1980s). I’d known this girl before she came to Christ, and I could see the difference now and it was attractive. And I was attracted to her.

So desperate to go out with her she said come along to the meetings I go to. Of course, they were all Christian meetings, bible studies, evangelistic rallies. At one of those meetings, I got my collar felt by the evangelist. He had made an appeal for people to declare their willingness to follow Jesus. I’d kept my hand in my pocket – I wasn’t going in for that emotional manipulation – I never buy into anything on the heat of the moment.

The evangelist said ‘what if you get run over by a bus tonight. Can you be sure you will go to heaven if you haven’t accepted Jesus as your saviour?’

‘I’ll take that risk mate’ I said.

But feeling challenged by our exchange I started to research the arguments for Christianity, the historical evidence, the reasoning for God, the testimonies of others. I had thought about becoming a Christian in my old age, because I thought at the end of the day its only old folk who go to church. I didn’t want Jesus cramping my style until then. Have some fun in life, live a bit, be free. But I felt the hand of God on me bringing conviction, and also the pestering of this girl, to the extent that I needed to decide.

I started reading John’s gospel with a little Gideon bible I nicked from my gran. Would you believe it – it was as if Jesus was speaking to me. I prayed the sceptics prayer – prayed as if I believed in God- ‘God if you are there then speak to me – in what I am reading, in the conversations and happenings of my day-to-day life – give me eyes and ears to hear and see you if you are there .’

Eventually, at a Billy Graham meeting in Blackpool I went forward at the end to commit my life to the Lord as good old Billy Graham invited us to.

I was a miserable convert. I felt bounced into the kingdom. And what made it worse was the girl didn’t really want to go out with me.

So, I got Jesus but not the girl.

Fear is a motivator. We do things out of fear don’t we. It is a motivator. Fear and hormones got me to Jesus. It is not the best motivator, however. I needed to know the love and I needed to sense the point of it all and the vision for something better. A few years later whilst at University I became open to the Holy Spirit, who brought the love, who gave me an experience of grace – a sense of God’s mercy and purpose for my life: not only was I loved but I was called -called to do something with my life.

Even as a teenager whilst hoping to have a life of fun and adventure I still wanted more. There was a sense of dissatisfaction with what the received purpose of life was about. You get an education in order to try and get a good job, a nice wife, a nice house some kids maybe some grand kids and then drop dead. Was that all that life was about?

Jesus came to bring us life, life in all tis fulness, not just a ticket to heaven. 40 years on from that decision to commit my life to Christ I can say I haven’t regretted it. It has been a full life - a great adventure. I’d recommend it to anyone. And as a church minster I get to do that for a living!

But the response of the crowd in this story, is that they ‘began to grumble and said [of Jesus], “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’’’ (v.7). Sometimes, change in others can be really difficult to accept, especially when everyone knows that person as they were.

Nobody would have liked Zacchaeus. Except, of course, Jesus. Looking up at Zacchaeus, Jesus sees neither a thug, nor a bureaucratic, nor a traitor to Jewish Nationalism. Rather, Jesus sees

a human being who has been outcast by the social and religious stigmas of his day. Zacchaeus exemplifies Jesus’ call to restore those who have been cast out and co-opted by pagan powers.

But this is a powerful story. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge’s life is transformed after his supernatural experiences, and he becomes a source of wonder to everyone who knew him previously. In Luke 19, the same is true of Zacchaeus – without the overtly supernatural back story. Like the previous story of the blind beggar, the story of Zacchaeus is one of inclusion: ‘he too is a son of Abraham’ (v.9) says Jesus.

The heart of being a Christian is to know that you are loved. You are a child of God. It gives you great security and acceptance in life – whatever you have or have not done. That is a great foundation to build your life on. Remember that and you will never be lost.

Louie, Penny, Harry, may you grow up to know you are loved not just by your parents but by God and that nothing can separate you from that love. Like Zacchaeus, don’t you ever let anyone tell you that you are anything but a precious child of God.” Then salvation will indeed come to your home.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, the world is in turmoil.
Our nation is in turmoil.
Your created ones are in turmoil.

**Come, Lord Jesus,
surround with songs of deliverance and bring about change.**

We pray for an end to the war in Ukraine. We pray for Somalia where people are enduring drought and facing famine. These are just two countries in the world but many more are in need of your hand.

**Come, Lord Jesus,
surround with songs of deliverance and bring about change.**

Our nation, Lord, is in need of your stability and unifying hand as the third Prime Minister in a year takes up residence in Downing Street. Bring order into the chaos. We pray for an upturn in our economy as more and more workers strike and threaten to strike, due to the biggest squeeze on incomes since the 1950’s.

**Come, Lord Jesus,
surround with songs of deliverance and bring about change.**

Lord, there are many people today lining their pockets at other people’s expense. We pray for all victims of scammers, cheats and fraudsters. We pray for all enduring dark times; for all who can see no way out. May the leaders of your church encourage and build in your name, offering hope where there is none. May your church shine a light on our communities and reach out to all, including those whom society views as unpopular.

**Come, Lord Jesus,
surround with songs of deliverance and bring about change.**

Lord, when you called to Zacchaeus, he gladly welcomed you to his home. His meeting with you brought about inward and outward change. We pray for change to be wrought in your world, in our nation, in us your created ones.

**Come, Lord Jesus,
surround with songs of deliverance and bring about change.
Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Thank you, Jesus,
for being with us today and every day.
In our noisy, busy lives,
we pray that we may hear you calling our names
and make the effort to see your face in the crowd.
**Amen.**