A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 2 November 2025 by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.

Looking for Jesus – a fellowship of little people

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

It was Bishop Michael Marshal who once said, 'You know you are in church if you look down the pew and say, what the hell is he doing here? If you look down and expect the people there, you are in the country club.'

So take a look around you today. Enjoy the sight for a moment. Today we encounter one of the great stories reminding us that Luke's is a gospel of mercy. A gospel for the outsider. A gospel with the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal and the penitent thief at its heart! No wonder Dante described Luke as 'the scribe of Christ's gentleness' as Luke knew well the truth of diversity and inclusivity of the Church. Luke knew that drawing those on the periphery into the centre is vital and challenges us to do likewise as we look for hope.

And we come together as those who know hope when we see it. When we hear the ghastly news of events such as the train stabbings at Huntingdon, we turn to Jesus, knowing there is nowhere else to turn .

So today we encounter Zacchaeus, the small tax collector. To say he was not popular would be an understatement. Yet Jesus has a care for the poor and the marginalised, such as Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus' story is an example of what the theologian Nicola Slee calls 'the project of lifelong faithing'.

There are those who would say that to understand today's Gospel passage we must look back to the hospitality of Rahab to the two spies in Joshua 2, or to Abraham's hospitality in Genesis 18. But whether you accept that or not, we have someone who longs to see Jesus – in fact he's curious, just as Herod has been . And like the Haemorrhagic woman who touches his cloak from behind he's among the crowd and unknown. In fact, Zacchaeus has seen Jesus or known him, he's just heard others talk about him.

To understand this story we have to look back to the story which has just been read in Chapter 18 (vv18-23) of the rich young ruler. Where the ruler could not do the 'one thing remaining', Zacchaeus (labelled a 'sinner') is able to

share his possessions with the poor as a steady commitment and be commended as a child of Abraham.

As we look more deeply at this story we note that far from being a story about a sinner who surprises, it is about a crowd who demonises. This fits with so much of Luke's Gospel – a Roman soldier, a 'good' Samaritan, a shrewd manager, a Samaritan leper who gives thanks. These unlikely figures are the heroines and heroes. And so often it's others around who look askance and judge others, and sadly we still see that in the life of the Church.

Now you might recall that Jesus has recently said 'Anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it' – here we have the childlike act of climbing the sycamore tree to be able to see Jesus! And here we see the image of the Sycamore tree – known from the Prophet Amos – become once again a place of encounter and calling from obscurity to enter a new life of mission and transformation.

But where we use the translation 'sycamore', it's a bit unhelpful. Because whilst the Greek word sounds similar, the fruit is actually that of the fig tree. And where do we know the fig tree from? Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve use fig leaves to cover their nakedness. So maybe Zacchaeus is in part hiding? This would be a bit like Peter who says 'depart from me' whilst falling to his knees in front of Jesus .

Luke uses the fig tree a number of times in his gospel to emphasise good works (6.43-44) and repentence (13.6-9). And some suggest that we can see this story as an actual participation in Jesus' paschal mystery. That is, we see the action of Zacchaeus being raised up, coming down and then sharing in a redemptive meal of the Kingdom. This is more than conversion, it's the 'salvific power of Jesus'.

Maybe you feel a bit mixed about even being here today? Do I have enough faith? Am I good enough? Today's story reminds us as we look around us – that yes, each of us belongs here . And each of us is seeking Jesus to know the power of hope in our broken world.

As we explore the story of Zacchaeus, I'm reminded of the words of Henri Nouwen, that a community is 'a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world.' Isn't that wonderful, 'a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world.'

Nouwen goes on to describe Christian community as being like a mosaic, where all the little stones are brought together in one big mosaic portraying the face of Christ.

Together we are witnesses of the compassionate Lord, and we carry each other's burdens and worries and share each other's joys as we testify to God's presence in our world. And we do so as a community of hope. And importantly, community - like solitude -is primarily a quality of heart.

Now because of Health and Safety, I have to ask you not to climb the pillars to see better, nor to climb the trees just outside – that would require a risk assessment these days! But instead, you will see Sally in the Eucharistic Prayer raise up the host and Chalice for all to see Jesus in the Eucharist.

There's a beautiful tradition that at the moment of elevating the host and then the Chalice, we can (under our breath) utter the words 'My Lord and my God' each time. I invite you to do so, and recall Zacchaeus and your own search for Jesus in your life.

Maybe like Zacchaeus, as we enter this Kingdom season we too can come closer to Christ. For this season is one which invites us to focus on the inbreaking of the Kingdom, of God's reign (from Pius X, the Episcopal Church and other Protestant Churches)– as we see and respond to Jesus in our lives and affirm our trust in hope.

So, friends, if you look down the pew and say, what the hell is she doing here? Remember we are 'a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world.'

Amen.

Toby Wright, Dean of Wells 2 November 2025