



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Sunday 5 July by the Very Reverend
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Zacchaeus and the dragons

In many ancient stories, mythical creatures live at the edge of the map. Dragons guard treasure. They are not simply monsters "out there"; they represent realities within us—fear, greed, pride, courage, wisdom and transformation. Today's story of Zacchaeus invites us to recognise that the Christian life is not merely a journey across geographical landscapes but through the strange territory of the human heart.

Consider the dragon we see in our Nave. In many myths, dragons hoard gold. They sit upon vast treasures that they neither use nor enjoy; their identity becomes bound up with possession. Zacchaeus begins the story in much the same way. For Zacchaeus' wealth has become both his treasure and his prison. He has accumulated much yet remains isolated from his community.

Modern psychology suggests that when our sense of worth becomes attached to achievement, status or possessions, we can become trapped by them. The more we have, the more we fear losing it. Our treasure ends up possessing us rather than the other way round.

Yet dragons are not always destructive figures. One of the fascinating things about the creatures currently inhabiting Wells Cathedral is that they remind us that dragons can also be guardians, protectors and symbols of transformation. In many traditions, the dragon is not merely an enemy to be slain but a keeper of something precious. There is an old saying that the dragon guards the gold. The challenge is not simply to destroy the dragon, but to discover what treasure it is protecting.

That insight speaks powerfully to our lives. Sometimes our fears, our resistances and even our struggles point us towards an important truth about ourselves. What if the thing we fear most is guarding some deeper gift that God wants to awaken? What if the obstacle is also the invitation?

In Zacchaeus's case, wealth had become both dragon and treasure. Yet Jesus does not destroy him; instead, Jesus transforms him, and the treasure no longer possesses its owner. The hoard is released, and we see generosity become the sign that the dragon's power has been redeemed. Zacchaeus discovers that his true treasure is not what he owns, but who he is becoming.

That theme feels especially relevant here at Wells Cathedral as we celebrate our exhibition of dragons, griffins and other mythical creatures. At first sight, they may seem decorative or playful. Yet cathedrals have long understood something profound: mythical creatures are not primarily about fantasy; they are about truth.

For centuries churches have filled their carvings, manuscripts and misericords with dragons, grotesques and strange beasts because they express realities that ordinary language struggles to capture. They are visual parables of the inner life, reminding us that human beings are more mysterious and more complex than we often imagine.

These creatures belong in a cathedral because a cathedral is concerned with what lies beneath the surface. Faith is not simply about external behaviour; rather it asks deeper questions of us. What is shaping our lives? What are we afraid of? What do we truly value? What treasure are we guarding?

The exhibition invites us not only to look at the creatures around us but also to look at ourselves. Carl Jung famously observed that "*who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes.*" These creatures encourage precisely that awakening. They remind us that there are dimensions of ourselves we may not yet fully know.

That is why they speak so powerfully into our present moment. We live in an age of uncertainty and rapid change which can feel so complex and overwhelming. Many people wrestle with questions of identity and belonging. Very often we are often encouraged to present polished versions of ourselves to the world while neglecting the deeper work of understanding who we truly are.

Zacchaeus surely wrestled with exactly those questions. Outwardly successful but inwardly restless, he had perhaps become trapped in what spiritual writers call the false self. The crowd saw a tax collector; and Zacchaeus may have seen little more than that himself. But Jesus saw something deeper. He looked beyond the reputation, beyond the failures, beyond the labels, and called forth the person hidden underneath.

"Zacchaeus, come down." In those few words, Jesus offers something profoundly liberating. Stop hiding; stop performing and stop defining yourself by

what others think of you. Let yourself be known. This is where transformation begins, not through heroic self-improvement, but through encounter. Zacchaeus changes because he is seen, welcomed and loved. The Gospel suggests that lasting transformation comes less through shame than through relationship.

The Saints understood this, as they were not people who never met dragons. They were people who learned that Christ was greater than them. They discovered that the fears that once threatened them could become opportunities for growth, wisdom and trust.

So, as we walk among these extraordinary creatures in Wells Cathedral, perhaps we should ask not simply, "What do they mean?" but, "What are they showing me about myself?" For psychologists sometimes speak of resilience not as the ability to avoid difficulty, but as the capacity to grow through it. Resilience is formed when we face challenges rather than flee them, learning that we are stronger and more resourceful than we first imagined. In that sense, the dragon becomes an important symbol. The things that intimidate us—failure, loss, uncertainty, disappointment—often become the very experiences through which character is formed. The dragon guards not only treasure but growth. We discover courage not before we face our fears, but by facing them. Many of the strongest, most compassionate and most grounded people are not those who have avoided struggle, but those who have passed through it and found that God was present with them along the way, as did Zacchaeus.

And the good news of this Gospel is that Jesus still comes to seek and save the lost. Jesus still looks up into trees and still calls people – including you and me - by name. And wherever Christ is welcomed, the dragons begin to loosen their grip, hidden treasures are released, and we become more fully the people God created us to be.

Amen.

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