

Isaiah 41:8-14

⁸ "But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
⁹ I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, 'You are my servant';
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
¹⁰ So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

¹¹ "All who rage against you
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;
those who oppose you
will be as nothing and perish.
¹² Though you search for your enemies,
you will not find them.
Those who wage war against you
will be as nothing at all.
¹³ For I am the LORD your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear;
I will help you.
¹⁴ Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob,
little Israel, do not fear,
for I myself will help you," declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

John 15: 1-15 (TNIV)

⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

Do you know what it is like to be told over and over again that you're short like as if somehow you didn't know how tall you were? Like you were some uncomprehending idiot with no sense of your own body.

I mean what's with that?

It's pretty darn obvious isn't it?

I'm short.

Or here's the other darn line: "You have got such small feet. What size shoes do you take?"

As if to say – there's – there's a perfect standard out there and you are surely not it.

Yes, I am angry about it, sick of being teased about it, sick of the jokes.

Part of me feels invisible, overlooked so often that I just got used to being pushed to the back, not being able to see and excluded from everything. Don't speak up much, because half the time nobody hears me, they're all looking over my head or trying to figure out where the voice is coming from. Nah, it is easier just to say nothing, hide, watch, listen. I'm very good at that.

And I've learned a thing or two, I sift around – listening, watching people's lives, figuring out their business, hiding in the back rooms, I know a few things, I hear it all and since they didn't respect me I don't care. I use it all against them.

I'm a Jew after all but I work for the Romans and they can't stand that.

But I don't need them

I'm pretty rich after all. I'm the Chief Tax collector.

Bribery is one of the tools of my trade.

Oh yeah, not got too many friends in my business. But I've had my revenge. I make them pay for all the times I've been the butt of their jokes.

Well, anyway, today the town's gone mad cos there's this messiah dude in town and everyone's gone crazy and I've managed to set myself up in this tree where I'm waiting for him to pass by. There's one thing for sure he won't be interested in - me he'll be just like the rest of them, caught up in their own importance, totally unaware of anybody like me, just out for the buzz they can get out of the crowd. But he'll give himself away, they usually do. I'll find something to pin on him and then I'll screw him for my silence.

It'll be interesting to see what he looks like up close though.

Thank God, I'm not in the middle of the rabble that's coming this way.

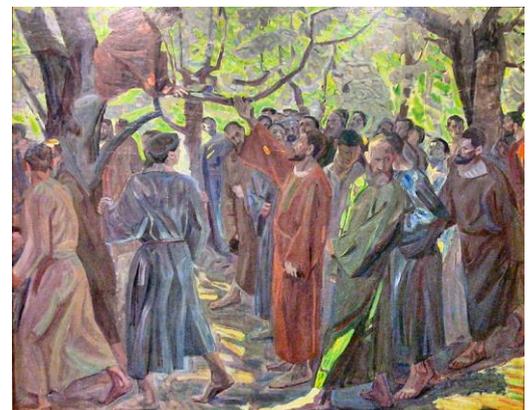
I've got a good view and nobody'll even notice me. That's just how I like it.

What are all those losers thinking they're gonna get from this guy anyway?

Hmm doesn't look anything remarkable to me, he's just being pulled about by this crowd, though... he looks like he's trying to say something.

Sounds like – sounds like my name.

No, that's impossible.



It can't be.
Why would he look up here?
And how on earth does he know my name?

But he is saying: "Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus."
Isn't he?
And he seems to be saying "Come down!
Come down, you've got to be kidding. This rabble is out to get my guts.
But he keeps saying: "Come down. I must come and stay at your place".

He what?
He wants to come to my place?

I must have heard that wrong.
Why would anyone want to come to my house?

Well, he actually doesn't seem to care about what I've done. He doesn't even seem to know that I'm just a piece of refuse in this town.
And he keeps repeating: "Come on down, Zacchaeus, I'm coming to your house today. Today's your day. I'm looking forward to being with you today."

He sees me.
He knows me.
He wants me!

I'm coming down! Because if you'll only say my name again and look at me and see me as a person and speak to me as if you care. I'll do anything, Jesus.
I'll sort out my life and I'll make amends for everything I've ever done.

And Jesus said: Today salvation has come to this house.
The Son of Man comes to seek and to save that which was lost.

Jesus said nothing about Zacchaeus' character, occupation, his big sins, his stink self-image – he simply called on him as a human being. He dignified him with a name, with eye contact, with time, with the desire to have a meal and stay awhile.

This is a fundamental illustration of the Good News. What is this?

It's friendship. God's friendship. Jesus reaching out, taking initiative.
It's the offer of relationship. Intimacy. Realness, belonging. And transformation.
Zaccheus so moved by the audacity of Jesus' undeserved love and acceptance came down and was finally able to become who he was meant to be, not some shallow imitation of fullness of life. He embodied through the forgiveness and Christ's acceptance of the meaning of his name: pure, clean and innocent.
Zaccai...pure, righteous in Christ.

We all have a baggage of the past. Some feature that has defined us, some contaminating factor in our sense of identity and self-worth, something we're ashamed of, something we've come to be angry about.

A past we've learned to manage and keep our lives functional. A past that keeps us up the tree or on the edge of the crowd, slightly removed, excusing ourselves for busyness or lateness, the time of life, because of hurt or bitterness.

But Jesus wants to push past that veneer we hide behind and have accepted about ourselves with his perspective on that and his friendship. Words like sin, repentance, accusation, born again do not figure at the centre of this conversation. Jesus entire life and death is an act of friendship and love, a love that never counts what we might measure as good or bad in a person...their character. Rather he uses the nickname Zaccai...pure, innocent, one I love. I'm here for you, as you are.

Where are you in the picture?

Jesus is always giving us an invitation to move closer. He wants to come to your house too. He wants the friendship to grow, to take up more responsibility.

Why is understanding the nature of this friendship with Jesus so important?

1. Being a friend of Jesus is an intrinsic part of our identity.

The most fundamental aspect of our identity is to know; deeply know, that you are a friend of God, loved by Him. This is foundational to our faith in Christ. In this respect God wants us to grow up. For if we always regard God with suspicion, someone to be pleased and ourselves as unworthy or incapable, or that we have to live up to a standard, then we remain infantile in our faith and He cannot trust us or use us.

2. But he wants to trust us with everything!

The passage in John 15 tells us that we are *not servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

- Servants don't know what their master is doing. The big plan and have no means to influence it.
They don't have that kind of intimacy - they are task oriented - they do as they are told - they are obedient.
- In v15, Jesus declares we are friends. Friendship on the condition of doing what is commanded, keeping the law (v 14) is removed.

Why? Because Jesus has made known to them everything He heard from the Father. He has spoken openly with them, withholding NOTHING. In the Greek/Roman world this is what true friends did.

'A friend hides nothing, if he is true; he pours forth his mind, just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of His Father.' (4th C Ambrose)

In sharing everything Jesus enables his disciples to participate in the intimacy and trust of His Father in the openness, which is the privilege of a free man and a friend.

- He has also shared everything of himself, made himself completely open and vulnerable to them. He's not a closed book.
The tangible shape of this love is consistently demonstrated by Jesus. But especially in the footwashing of chapter 13. This act of hospitality and friendship was quite shocking to the disciples. It represented a shift in their relationship. Masters do not wash people's feet!!! And the disciples express their discomfort at this intimacy, but

Jesus meets Peter's resistance ...you'll never wash my feet, with: Unless I wash you, you have no share in Me (13:8) Unless I wash you, unless you participate in my love, you are not my friend. !! this word participate is the Greek word koinonia...share, fellowship, community.

- In this act, the distance was removed from the disciples ...where they could hold Jesus at arms' length. This was disarming intimacy. He moved closer. He got in their face. Just like to Zaccheus...I'm coming...uninvited to your house. Get down and prepare. In the footwashing the disciples move from being servants and master, rabbi and disciples to being friends. Jesus names it in John 15:15, but he has enacted it earlier and he will do it again on the cross. He will get in their face and lay down his life for his friends!!
- When we take communion we share again in this intimacy. Is not this a 'participation', a sharing in the body of Christ. An act of fellowship, koinonia, friendship. He has shared himself completely because that is what friends do. He has withheld nothing not even his life.
- And he has shared with them, made open to them, the whole of his relationship with the Father. In this respect they can no longer be servants who are told only so much and have no say in anything, they are entrusted friends, part of the social dynamic of the trinity. This is significant shift in self-understanding for every Christian and needs to shift from head to heart experience.

3. Jesus expects us to step up and be alongside Him because

- friends share the business. They are trusted on that level to have a hand in what's going on. To even change God's mind as was the trusted privilege of Abraham. WE are trusted with the Father's purposes in this world, to share in bringing about the reign of God on earth. We have access to the Father's heart.
- So our function changes – we work **'with'** not **for** Him; co-labourers and heirs with Christ, in partnership. 'In' Christ we work **from** His favour not **for it** - trying to gain it. He entrusts us with more and more as we grow. Worth more thoughts, what does this look like to partner with Christ in the coming kingdom.

4. Unaware and infantile we are ineffective. If the enemy can keep us as unaware and as infantile in our faith as possible, then we will be ineffective, useless, a non-threat to him. If we don't know who we are in Christ then we will not learn how to be friends and partners with God in the world. And we will not share the Gospel, we won't pray for miracles and we won't take risks for the Kingdom of God and our community will be the poorer. .

Our capacity to know God, to hear Him and to serve Him is always under attack!

Intimacy with God is to be warred for, sought after and longed for.

Take some time to be with Jesus and let Him show you how he is your friend.

In my world I would draw this scene and I would begin to write down what I hear Him saying. The reason for this is because it makes the Word concrete and immediate. It's not just a story, it's a living interaction with the Lord Jesus Christ. Here, immediate, present to my reality.

He wants to be my friend and engage with me in my home, every day.

Put yourself in the place of Zacchaeus.

You may be up a tree, or you may be at the back of the crowd straining to see.

You may not even be in the crowd, you are at home just trying to keep with stuff.

You may be in a lonely place or a beautiful scene.

Wherever it is, wherever your mind has taken you, let yourself imagine that you are not alone. Jesus is in the scene. And he has sought you out intentionally.

What do you feel about the fact that Jesus sees you, knows you, wants you?

He wants to come to your house?

Imagine that.

Maybe your mind immediately leaps to the dishes undone or the lawns not mown.

Something's are unkempt.

Maybe you have some resistance like Peter.

Take a moment to let Him meet your questions or allay your fears or challenge your reluctance.

He has something to say to you.

Maybe reaching out to embrace you.

There is a truth he wants you take away from today about what He thinks of you and what he is affirming about your call.

Let your mind receive His words of affirmation and invitation.

Where you are weary and have given up in well doing and passionate fervour for the Kingdom, God would like to refresh you.

Where you have let disappointment get its grip on you and lost touch with Jesus on a personal and intimate level, he would like you to know that He is as much in love with you as ever and that He so longs to come to your house and fellowship with you.

He is still the wellspring of life.

He is still the Hope of the world.