**Luke 19:1-10 Zacchaeus – soundly converted**

If you ever went to Sunday school, no doubt the story we’ve just heard about the little man called Zacchaeus is one you’ll remember.

I’ve brought my ukulele along today – to see if you remember this little song….. (Zacchaeus was a wee little man)

 The possibility of conversion, or sudden change, is very much an ‘in’ concept these days. Present-day psychology, contrary to the teaching of Sigmund Freud, says that we *can* get past our childhood; we don’t have to be a product of our upbringing. For those who have had a difficult or deprived childhood, that's really good news.

When I was at college, we were taught that people fall basically into two categories – called simply type A and type B. Type As are hard-working, over-achievers who get very stressed and have a high incidence of heart attacks. Type Bs go through life smelling the roses, having fun, and enjoying the world, and of course, they live longer.

Instead of just focusing on how to treat the stress and heart conditions that Type As suffer from, doctors are now asking whether it is possible for Type As to become more like Type Bs and so *prevent* their health issues.

My sister in law was one who took this to heart. In her 30s she was a top-flight telecommunications executive. She worked very long hours but got great results. She was head-hunted by one company after another. In her 40s she began to have heart problems. She had a pacemaker by age 50. She saw the writing on the wall, and decided to quit her job altogether. She joined with a friend and started a low key dog training business, leaving all the stress and long hours behind her. She’s never looked back.

Most of us will have seen the play or movie ‘My Fair Lady’. Now there’s a story of conversion for you! A poor and rather coarse lass from the wrong side of the tracks is transformed into a woman of great beauty and refinement through the dedicated instruction of a mentor.

Conversion. It can happen in any walk of life, any field of endeavour.

Conversion is at the very heart of the Bible’s message. Throughout both Old and New Testaments, we read stories of people whose lives have radically changed because of their encounter with God.

How well do you know your Bible stories? Can you think of people whose lives drastically changed?

There’s Moses. After murdering and Egyptian and escaping Pharaoh’s clutches in Egypt, he became a nomad in the wilderness of Haran. God called him to deliver a nation. He was petrified! He told God to send his brother, not him. Yet, under the power of God, Moses became the greatest leader Israel had ever known.

(David, Gideon, Esther…)

Then there’s Paul – so zealous for the Jewish cause that he hunted down the early Christians and had them arrested and imprisoned. The Christians were terrified of him! Then one day, Jesus appeared to him, knocking him off his horse, and rendering him blind. Jesus called Paul to serve him, healed him, and then sent him to preach to the very people he persecuted. Paul’s is one of the great conversion stories of the New Testament.

Perhaps those stories are a bit far removed from us. However, in more recent times, the stories are just as powerful.

History abounds with examples of sudden and surprising conversions.

**John Henry Newton** (b 1725) He lost his mother at the age of 7, and by the time he was 9 or 10, had become a little crim. He went to sea at a young age and became involved with the slave trade. Newton described his life this way: ‘My whole life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness.’ His life was sick, debauched and empty. He describes a time of unimaginable despair, when, to top it all off, the ship he was on was overtaken by a horrendous storm. Newton thought they would all die, and he called out to God for mercy.

In that moment, Newton encountered God. Not only did he experience God’s mercy as the ship made it through the storm, but he experienced the God’s mercy through forgiveness and cleansing deep within.

Newton’s conversion was profound. He left life at sea, became a minister, hymn-writer, and later a prominent supporter of the [abolition of slavery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism). John Newton of course, wrote the most famous of all hymns – Amazing Grace.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.*

In recent years, a movie has been made of his story. I really recommend seeing it. It’s inspirational!

William Booth, born in 1929, was another unlikely convert. This rough-cut man, appalled that the poor and the homeless had nowhere to turn, founded the Salvation Army. One day he prayed, "Lord, I give you everything there is in this man, William Booth. Do with me what you will." With that one man's conversion, a movement started that changed, and continues to change, hundreds of thousands of lives.

In terms of the conversion experience, the story of Zacchaeus is an important case study. Jesus was on his way to a town called Jericho. It was a very busy place - a hub of all the trade routes from Jerusalem. King Herod had a palace there. It was a historic city. Mark Antony once gave Jericho to Cleopatra as a present. Joshua and his trumpeters had brought down its walls.

Jesus was passing through this important city, and crowds had come out in force to see Him - this amazing miracle worker and holy man, who might just be the Messiah.

Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, was a part of the crowd. But, being a short man, he couldn’t see. Tax collectors were viewed pretty much as scum in that culture. They were Jews, appointed by the Romans to collect taxes from their fellow Jews, and were given licence to line their own pockets in the process. They were viewed as traitors and really hated – consequently no-one was going to let Zacchaeus through to see Jesus. So he climbed a tree.

Finally the parade approached. A Jesus passed by, in spite of the crowd on both sides of the road, he singled out Zacchaeus. Jesus told him to come down, and invited himself to dinner – which was a most incredible *honour!* It totally scandalised the crowd.

But Jesus knew Zacchaeus. He knew that he needed to be forgiven and set free from the pit he had dug for himself. His agenda was to save this man whom everyone despised.

Luke gives us a condensed story of the encounter. We don’t know all the details. But we do know that Zacchaeus was completely transformed by his meeting with Jesus. He declared that he would repay anyone he had cheated, four times as much. That was actually the law for someone who was caught cheating. But Zacchaeus went further – he declared that he would give away half of everything he owned to the poor. He became a follower of Jesus that day.

Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." Zacchaeus may have let go of his wealth, but what he received was worth way more than riches. He was given forgiveness, a completely fresh start, friendship with Jesus, and *eternal life*! He was made whole, complete – given the chance to be the person that God created him to be. That is what *salvation* means – to be made whole, or complete.

Conversion isn’t always sudden. Sometimes it is a process that we move towards over a period of months or even years. Physical birth isn’t instant either, when you think about it – though of course the child’s entry into the world is fairly dramatic. Some people find that they ‘grow into’ their faith over a period of time, and that sort of conversion is just as valid as the conversion someone experiences in a moment of dramatic encounter with God.

However, regardless of how we come to conversion, we are truly ‘converted’ when we can say, “I have recognised that I have done wrong things. I have sinned and offended God. I have asked Jesus to forgive me, and I have made the decision to follow him for the rest of my life.” That is conversion. We may reach that realisation gradually over time, or it may come to us in an instant. But that is the realisation we must all reach to be able to say, “I am a Christian” and to know that we too have eternal life.

The decision to follow Jesus is such an important one, that it needs to be marked. Following Jesus’ resurrection, as he said farewell to his followers, he gave them an important commission. They were to go out into the world and *tell everyone* the good news of how to find forgiveness and freedom and eternal life through following Jesus.

When people responded to this message, and stepped forward to follow Jesus – they were to be baptised. The water was to be a sign that they were washed clean from their sin, and were thereafter members of God’s family.

Where are we this morning in our journey with God? Can we say we are converted? (be that a gradual or a sudden process?) Or have we yet to *be* converted?

There’s a story about a man who retired after forty years in a job that required him to catch the 7:30 bus every morning. On the first morning of his retirement, he commented on the breakfast his wife had fixed. "Honey, I don't like eggs this way."

"But, I've been serving you scrambled eggs for forty years," she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I never had time," was the reply.

It's a poor excuse—for him and for us.

When is the time to consider conversion? 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, “Listen! This is the hour to receive God's favour; today is the day to be saved!”

Let’s pray.