

As we enter Lent ...

Rest in my love, trust me again

My reflection this week begins with a well-known Gospel story, the story of Zacchaeus, found in Luke's Gospel. Entwined in this story I offer the words of the beautiful hymn, *Come As You Are*, which was composed by Sr Deirdre Brown, IBVM.

This is a story about a man whose heart was changed and renewed, a man who was called by Jesus and loved by Jesus, even though he was a sinner. And he became a better person than he had been.

**Come as you are, that's how I want you,
Come as you are, feel quite at home,
Close to my heart, loved and forgiven,
Come as you are, why stand alone.**

Jesus entered the town of Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there whose name was Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was very rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place where Zacchaeus was, he looked up and said to him: 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today'.

**No need to fear, love sets no limits,
No need to fear, love never ends,
Don't run away, shamed and disheartened,
Rest in my love, trust me again.**

So Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus into his house. But everyone who saw this began to grumble and said: 'He has gone to be the guest of someone who is a sinner'. But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord: 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much'. Then Jesus said to him: 'Today salvation has come to this house, for I have come to seek out and save the lost'.

**I came to call sinners, not just the virtuous,
I came to bring peace, not to condemn,
Each time you fail to live by my promise,
Why do you think I'd love you the less.**

Come as you are, that's how I love you,

**Come as you are, trust me again,
Nothing can change the love that I bear you,
All will be well, just come as you are.**

Zacchaeus and his story may seem a long way away from our world. It's a very old story, two thousand years old! Zacchaeus was a tax collector who worked for the Roman Empire. Now in those days, tax collectors were people employed by the Roman Emperor to go around from home to home and collect taxes from people. But what happened was that these tax collectors used to take more money from people than they needed to. They gave what they had to the Emperor and pocketed the rest. Of course we all pay taxes today, but that was quite a different system of collecting them! People hated the tax collectors and were afraid of them. They knew that when the tax collector arrived they would be cheated out of their money. And often these were very poor people too. Zacchaeus was a thief. He stole money from people and he became rich by doing that. He was a man who thought only of himself and he profited from the misery of others. And then we heard how this man, Zacchaeus, was a short man and that he climbed a tree to see Jesus as he passed by. Not something we see happening in our neighbourhood today! Zacchaeus' story can seem like another world!

But what if we do some substitutions? And instead of Zacchaeus the tax collector in the Roman Empire, we put some other people into the story. Let's see what happens! And who might these people be?

First of all, let's think about the pimps in Cambodia. As you know, pimps are people who recruit young women for prostitution and who make a profit out of that. A few years ago at one of our school assemblies we all met Somaly Mam, that amazing Cambodian woman who was herself forced into prostitution as a young girl, and we heard of her work rescuing girls from brothels where they are forced into sex often at a very young age, many of them still children. What have they stolen from these girls? They have stolen innocence, childhood, dignity, bodily health and mental health, dreams, happiness, love. And they do this because all they think about is themselves and growing rich from the misery of others. Not so different from Zacchaeus.

And let's think about the child soldiers in Africa. These young boys are taken away from their families, given a gun and taught how to shoot and kill. They have had their innocence stolen from them. They lose their families and they have their adult life of good mental and emotional health stolen from them because many of them are shattered by this experience. They are destroyed emotionally and never recover from it, living with the guilt and the horror of what they have seen and done. All this happens so that rebel forces in these countries can profit from them and use them to do their dirty work. Again, not so different from Zacchaeus.

Let's think of the people arriving on the shores of any country that seems to offer a better life, indeed a life at all. Refugees and asylum seekers. These are desperate people and they leave situations of war or terror, willing to risk their lives for the chance of peace, a future, a home, a place to flourish. And when they get there, as has been the case in our own country, they are often met with hostility and discrimination. That hope is taken from them and often it is a long time, if ever, before the peace and life they seek are found. Again, not very different to what Zacchaeus did all those centuries ago.

Now let's bring it more specifically home. Tuesday this week we acknowledged the tenth anniversary of Kevin Rudd's apology to the Indigenous peoples. He said sorry to them on behalf of all Australians for what was done to them. Let's think of the Indigenous children who were taken away from their families in the Stolen Generations. Their happiness was taken away and their security, family life and relationships were lost. Distraught mothers and fathers were deprived of their children and that loss continues today. In the film, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, there are tragic scenes of mothers chasing cars as their children are driven away and mothers and fathers running away, clutching their babies, frantically trying to hide their children as they see the black government cars approaching in the distance. Theft and loss: not too different from Zacchaeus.

Indigenous people were also deprived of their land and culture, traditions and language, dignity and identity, their place to belong. This was all stolen, all lost. It was taken so that others could profit and benefit. Similar to the Zacchaeus story too. Those who carried out these practices thought only of themselves and profited from what they took.

And let's come even closer home. This is where it can get uncomfortable because this is about all of us. Think about the happiness that is taken away from anyone when we gossip. Think of the self-esteem that can be taken away when someone is put down by nasty comments in a group. Think of the peace and security that are stolen when someone is bullied or left out of a group invitation, or ignored. Think of the goodness that goes out of a community when there is nastiness or hypocrisy or jealousy or grudges held or disrespect or rudeness. And this is all very close to home. We are all capable of it and it can happen at any moment in our families, in our groups.

What happens? When we think only of ourselves and treat other people badly, we cause a lot of misery, whether it's the misery of those young girls in Cambodia or the misery of the person close to us we have disrespected.

But it doesn't have to be like that! There's another way of doing things. And that way is love. That way is justice. We do have the power to put love into practice and we do have the power

to act in justice. We just have to let ourselves be led and influenced by something other than our own self-interest. And we can do it!

To do this, to do the better thing, we have a great source of power available to us. Just think of Zacchaeus again. He didn't change on his own. I don't think Zacchaeus got up that morning and realised he was a cheat, a thief and, feeling bad about that, decided to make a difference that day. But what he did do was hear Jesus calling him. And he got up, he responded. He came down from the tree and responded. He didn't ignore that call, he let Jesus touch his life, he listened to that invitation, spoken just to him: *I want to come to your house today Zacchaeus*. He took Jesus into his home and then things began to change. He stopped spreading misery, he stopped stealing from people and he offered to give back four times what he had stolen. I bet he wasn't expecting that his day would turn out like that when he woke up that morning or when, out of curiosity, he climbed a tree to get a good look at that man Jesus who happened to be passing by.

And we can do the same. We **need** to do the same. Our world desperately needs love and justice. And it is up to us. We can stop the misery we see and bring love and justice into our world. There are people in our own country and everywhere in the world, and right here in our own community who are depending on us to be a loving, just person. Just think of all those young girls in Cambodia whose lives would still be lived in misery if it wasn't for Somaly Mam.

So our invitation during Lent is to ponder this question: *Where is Jesus speaking to me in my life right now?*

And the other really important thing to hear today is this: you're not alone. Jesus offers to be with you, to fill you with forgiveness and strength and peace. In our Christian religion we call this grace. Grace is that wonderful outpouring of God's love, strength and help. Often grace comes without us asking for it. It is given to us whether we are good or not, we don't have to work for it, it comes freely as God's loving gift and it enables us to do things we never imagined we could do. Lent is the time to really let this grace pour into our hearts.

May every Christian be reborn in God's love so that they can become God's true children – Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

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