

Lenten Sermon: Very Rev David Rowe, 4th week of Lent 2019

- 00:00 One of the things I really like about the gospels is that they are a kind of audio visual of Amazing Grace. I used to be in a Christian theatre company and a friend of mine Murray Watts and Paul Burbridge, they wrote this sketch all about Zacchaeus. And he worked for a government department. He wanted to see Jesus. So he climbs this tree and as he is up there, in the sketch, the crowd get wind of the fact that he is there hiding and they gather round the bottom of the tree and they start pointing at him saying, "What are you doing up there? It's no wonder you've got no friends, you steal from people" and so on.
- 00:32 He says, "Let the dog see the rabbit, let the dog see the rabbit. You're not supposed to be looking at me, look at Jesus. What's he looking at, anyway? There's nobody else up this tree is there?" He says, "Hello! Hello!" And then somebody calls, "Zacchaeus!" And he says, "Who called my name? Who was it? Which one of you called my name?" And then it comes again, "Zacchaeus!" And then he points his finger, he says, "It was Jesus! What does Jesus want to call my name for?"
- 01:00 I mean I'm a fiddler and a diddler and a thief and I nick people's wallets!" And the crowd are going "Yea 'course you are!" And Jesus says, "Zacchaeus! If you don't hurry up, you're gonna be late." And Zacchaeus says, "Am I? What for?" And Jesus says, "For tea. I'm coming to your house for tea." And Zacchaeus says, "Are you? How did you know?" Jesus said, "I've just decided to." And then Zacchaeus says, "Well you can't just come to my house, I mean, I haven't done the washing up.....this month."
- 01:32 And then everybody goes, "Urgh!" And then Jesus says, "Zacchaeus I haven't come to see your house. I've come to see you." And then Zacchaeus says, "Well maybe there's all kinds of things about me that I wouldn't want you to see. Like all the fiddling and the diddling and nicking people's wallets and all that kind of thing." And the crowd are all going, "Yeah, yeah!" And then he says, "I'll tell you what: I'll give it all back." And the crowd pause. In this amazing moment. And then he says, "Nah, no I won't." And they all groan and then he says, "I'll tell you what, I'll give it back four times as much."
- 02:03 Four times as much! Well that's grace, that's transforming grace you see. And he turns and he says, "Jesus, are you really coming to my house?" And Jesus says, "Yes, your house! No kidding! No kidding." And they are leaping about all over the place and then Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, today salvation has come to you." What amazing transforming grace, an abundant gift of God in Jesus, and an abundant response from Zacchaeus. This is amazing.
- 02:32 Four times as much. That's the transforming grace and you see it countless times in the gospel stories. And you see it through life too. In your study you'll be looking at John Newton the great slave trader who did this trade in flesh across the oceans, abusing and mistreating people and so on, and then he met Jesus.
- 02:54 And through the transforming grace of Jesus something began to happen to John Newton so that he pens that great song, *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.* What transforming grace!

- 03:14 And then he begins, gradually as he grows to know Jesus, to know he has to do something that helps with the abolition of the slave trade that he was so immersed in. So he has a conversation with William Wilberforce and he is an inspiration behind Wilberforce who begins that process in Parliament to begin to get to the abolition of the slave trade. Such an amazing thing. Newton, transformed slave trader to be a disciple of Jesus' transforming grace.
- 03:44 And there was Newton, near his deathbed, when he says to his friends, "Look at me," he said, "here I am. Packed and sealed and ready for the post. My memory is fading but two things I remember. I am a great sinner. But Christ is a great saviour." And then another time he would say, "I'm not what I ought to be. I'm not what I want to be. I'm not what I hope to be. But still, I'm not what I used to be.
- 04:13 And by the grace of God I am what I am. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." That's Newton. Transforming grace. And then you'll be looking at Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. What an amazing story of a man who is full of grace and a man who is transformed by grace. The bishop in that story,
- 04:40 you don't get this in the movies so much or the musical, but you get it in the story, the first 70 pages of the story of *Les Mis*. You see, this bishop was full of grace. He has this house, the bishop's palace. And he's living in it. And there's a cottage hospital nearby and they're running out rooms, it's a dingy hospital, that's all they've got to treat people. And the bishop says, "Why am I living in this palace? And you've got this rundown old building for a hospital. Hey, why don't we swap?"
- 05:09 So they swap and the bishop lives in this rundown old house as his home. And then there's Jean Valjean the convict who is arrested for stealing a loaf of bread. And then he ends up cycle after cycle with bitterness and resentment in his heart and eventually comes out of prison. But because he's a convict nobody will accept him. Nobody will welcome. There is no grace anywhere in the world for him until somebody says you might like to try that old house over there because there's somebody there who could help you.
- 05:42 Who could welcome you. And that's when he gets invited into the home by who he thinks is a priest – he doesn't think he's a bishop because he's living in this rundown old house. He's a priest, and he comes in and he gives him a meal. And just in the story he says this, he says to him, "*Monsieur le Coeur*," as he talks to the priest, "*You are very good. You don't despise me. You've taken me in and lighted your candles for me, but I'll not conceal from you where I come from or what I am.*" The bishop, seated at his side, laid a hand gently on his arm.
- 06:13 "*You need have told me nothing,*" he said. "*This house is not mine but Christ's. It does not ask a man his name but whether he is in need. You are in trouble. You are hungry and thirsty and so you are welcome. You need not thank me for receiving you in my house. No one is at home here except those seeking shelter. Let me assure you, passer by though you are, that this is more your home than mine. Everything in it is yours. Why should I ask your name?*"

- 06:42 *In any case I knew it before you told me.” The man looked at him with startled eyes. “You know my name?” “Of course,” said the bishop. “Your name is ‘my brother.’ ” And then he offers him a bed to sleep for the night. And Jean Valjean, still with the bitterness of heart, he sees the silverware. He sees all that’s on the table and he decides that in the night he is going to steal it and he is going to make off with it and sell it. But he is caught by the *gendarme*, the police.*
- 07:10 They bring him back and the police face Jean Valjean to the bishop and they say, “He’s stolen your cutlery, your silverware.” And the bishop says, “He didn't steal it. I gave it to him. And by the way, you forgot the candlesticks.” And he takes the candlesticks and he places them on top of the pile and he says, “They’re yours. And by the way, you don't need to sneak out the back door – the front door is always open. You're always welcome.” And what happens to Jean Valjean?
- 07:39 Something happens in his heart. He begins to be transformed. This is what we read: *Obscurely he perceived that the priest's forgiveness was the most formidable assault he had ever sustained; that if he resisted it his heart would be hardened once and for all, and that if he yielded he must renounce the hatred which the acts of men had implanted in him during so many years, and to which he clung.*
- 08:05 *He saw dimly that this time he must either conquer or be conquered, and that the battle was now joined, a momentous and decisive battle between the evil in himself and the goodness in that other man. Jean Valjean wept for a long time. How long did he stay weeping? What did he then do and where did he go?*
- 08:26 *We do not know. But it is said on that same night the stage-driver from Grenoble, passing through the cathedral square in Digne at three in the morning, saw in the shadows the figure of a man kneeling in an attitude of prayer outside the door of the house of the bishop. Transforming grace. Abundance offered, abundance received, and then abundance given. What transforming grace that is. And that transforming grace is for all of us.*
- 08:56 We are grace people. We can be transformed by grace but we can transform others too, through the grace of Christ that works through us. So you are a grace person. You're forgiven. You have abundance. Abundant life. So we can forgive, and we can be life-givers to others. Let us be grace people.