

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

2nd April 2017

Luke 19:1-10

Spirit... may we be alive to your truth... moving to your beat... alert to your imagination... and called to your vision... may we be inspired by your word... and filled with your love... So be it... Amen

The power of a good story... is even more powerful when it is misinterpreted... apparently... which is what a few of us found out this week...

The idea to have a small local Harry Potter event in Bearsden... would be a great idea... or so a minister... an episcopal priest... a butcher... a florist... and a cafe owner thought... until it went viral across the internet... we had never been so popular in our lives... within just 4 days... there are 10,000 likes on Facebook... from Harry Potter fans around the world... who all wanted to descend on Bearsden... over a weekend in June...

For those for whom this is news... you've had a better week than I've had... Let me briefly explain... What started out as a small Sunday School event for ourselves... on the last weekend in June... grew exponentially this week... It is the 20th anniversary of the first Harry Potter book being published that weekend... and with our Sunday School we thought it would be interesting to find all the Christian themes in Harry Potter... for the whole story... is the Christian story... of love winning against fear and evil... of light being more powerful than the dark... and ultimately someone loving you so much that they give their life so you might live...

This idea grew a wee bit after talking to four others with whom we have worked before when we do our festivals... A wee local festival on Harry Potter would be easy... We did what we have always done in the past... and put a Facebook page up on the internet... but within two days... it had spread like a virus... indeed it was a pandemic... So many people sent news of this event to so many of their friends on line... that it grew exponentially... thousands of Harry Potter fans decided they were coming to Bearsden...

Despite putting only four pieces of information on the site... two of which politely asked people not to come... we couldn't stop it... They had misinterpreted what this was... A wee local street festival run by a minister and a priest... a butcher, a baker and candlestick

maker... had turned into T in the Park... with over 1.8 million people reading about it within two or three days...

Those same two or three days... were sandwiched between two or three sleepless nights... and the decision was made to cancel... 10,000 or more people coming to Bearsden Cross would have been a disaster... and a festival that was meant to encourage neighbourliness... would have ruined any good that it was intended to do...

But... the cancelling... became the bigger story... for five national newspapers... 2 radio channels... and the BBC news website ran the story... of an event cancelled... because it was misinterpreted...

Now... we're eating a little humble pie at our naiveté... that a local festival could be misinterpreted as Glastonbury... This is not a new thing... to be misinterpreted... The pharisees and the crowd... who stood at the door of Zacchaeus' house... waiting for Jesus and the tax collector to come out after tea... are case in point...

There are two ways of telling the Zacchaeus story... The one you find in the version of the Bible we use here... that says... when Zacchaeus comes out he responds to Jesus by saying... that he'll give half of his possessions to the poor... and that he'll repay fourfold to all the people that he's cheated...

That's how we have usually heard the story... but while not on the scale of Harry Potter festivals... this is a misinterpretation...

Which brings us to the other way to read the story... found in the classic King James version... that has Zacchaeus saying... "Lord, I always give half of my wealth to the poor... and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy... I always make a fourfold restitution"...

Notice the difference... In the traditional rendering... Zacchaeus... the tax collector... is the baddy... Of course he is... he's tax collector... That's what tax collectors do... The pharisees and crowd recognise that... because look how they react when Jesus chooses to call Zacchaeus down from the tree and have a meal with him... "He's eating with that tax collector and sinner!... what does he think he is doing?... Are our eyes deceiving us?... What does he think he is doing?"...

But look says the story... Jesus spins his magic... (maybe that's not the right phrase to use today)... and Zacchaeus changes... and promises he will give away four times what he has taken from folk...

But the second way of reading the story... has Zacchaeus being completely misinterpreted from the very beginning... Everyone thinks he's a sinner because local prejudice tells everyone he must be because he is a tax collector... but when he comes out the house with Jesus what does he say?... He says... "Lord, I *always* give half of my wealth to the poor... and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy... I always make a fourfold restitution"... In other words... Zacchaeus is already doing this...

The verb used is present... not future... Zacchaeus is describing what he is doing now... and that's why Jesus calls him a son of Abraham... he is already acting like one...

So Zacchaeus has been misinterpreted... It is the tax collector who is the good guy... and Jesus seems to know that... and invites the crowd to remove the log in their own eye... before commenting about the splinter in Zacchaeus'...

Everyone thought they knew what this character was like... but they completely misinterpreted him... either their prejudice towards him or their arrogance about themselves... blinded them to what was actually true... Zacchaeus is the one who is already giving to the poor... unlike all those who are standing there judging him on what they think he is like...

We misinterpret the story... perhaps... if we imagine this a story about a sinner repenting... rather than Jesus... holding up as an example of the kingdom... someone we think doesn't come close to it...

How many times does Jesus do that... with Samaritans and prodigals and shrewd managers and lepers who return to say thanks... The kingdom is full of misinterpreted people... and we are some of them...

The despicable Zacchaeus is the generous one... Indeed ... Zacchaeus' name means Righteous one... Turns out... Zacchaeus lives up to his name...

Let us for now watch Jesus as he holds a mirror up to us... that reflects the times we might misinterpret people... because we imagine what they are like... because we've got the wrong end of the story... and instead celebrate and enjoy the holy surprise... when we find in the least expected... and the misinterpreted... the way of the kingdom...