

Here the facing of intractability is seen as an aspect of God “transcribed” into the human world. Such a ‘facing’ is therefore an aspiration for Christian disciples, for all who work to end suffering, and for those who seek to write on the difficult and tortuous questions this article has sought to examine.

- 1 In notes on *The Birth of Tragedy* written in late 1888, just before insanity. Contained in an appendix to Hausmann’s translation (see footnote 2 below) p193.
- 2 *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism* (translated by Wm. A. Hausmann) T. N. Foulis, 1910. @3, p 34.
- 3 *The Birth of Tragedy* @25, p. 186.
- 4 *Nietzsche on Tragedy* M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, Cambridge, 1981, p 338.
- 5 *City of God* translated by Henry Bettenson, Penguin, 1972, 11.2 [p 49].
- 6 For example see Books 9 and 10 of *City of God or The Christian Combat (The Fathers of the Church* Volume 4, 1947).
- 7 *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology* Larry Bouchard, Pennsylvania, 1989, op. cit., p 62.
- 8 “Christology, Tragedy and ‘Ideology’”, *Theology* 1986 pp 284–5.
- 9 *The Problem of Metaphysics*, Cambridge, 1974, p 124.
- 10 *ibid* pp 124–5.
- 11 *ibid* p 133.
- 12 *ibid* p 135.
- 13 “Ethics and Tragedy” in *Explorations in Theology* 5, op. cit., p 194.
- 14 Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Blackwell, 1986, p 143.
- 15 *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology*, op. cit., p 228.
- 16 “Incarnation and Trinity” in *Themes in Theology* T&T. Clark, 1987, pp162–3.

Zacchaeus : Chance and Necessity?

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A Sermon, written for the Internet series of weekly sermons by Dominicans, for the 31st Sunday of the Year: C. The Scriptural texts were Wisdom 11:22–2:2; Thessalonians 1:11–2:2 and Luke 19:1–10.

Does God play dice with the universe?
Is everything the product of chance?
Is necessity a one-way road along which we must travel?
Why are some people given faith and others not?

These are the kinds of questions that should jostle for attention in our minds as we consider today’s gospel. And yet at first sight the story of Zacchaeus up a tree could well seem just a charming and picturesque Oriental tale, told to make the simple point that Jesus leaves nobody out.

Dwell a little longer on those questions that float in and out of our consciousness as we begin to reflect on the gospel. To read the Scriptures in the Christian assembly as part of the liturgy is not the same kind of activity as reading them alone at home. To start with, the Sunday readings are selected and combined for us. We come to the gospel story about Zacchaeus only after we have taken in the reading from the book of Wisdom. That first reading already releases large questions and cosmic issues into our consciousness:

In your sight, Lord, the whole world is like a grain of dust that tips the scales . . . Yet you love all that exists . . . And how, had you not willed it, could a thing persist?

So, back to the gospel. Consider what might have been that day in Jericho. What if Jesus had gone down another street at the last minute and bypassed Zacchaeus? What if Zacchaeus hadn't found a suitable tree to climb into? What if in dashing about he got run over and killed by a passing wagon? Was Zacchaeus under an irresistible compulsion to do what he did? Was he bound to succeed? What of all the other lost men and women who did not have the benefit of such personal attention from Jesus? We are starting to sense the penetrating truth in the opening lines of a poem by Elizabeth Jennings:

I kept my answers small and kept them near;
Big questions bruised my mind but still I let
Small answers be a bulwark to my fear.

The details in the story are the precise, mundane specifications of those larger questions raised at the beginning. It is *exactly* like this in the life of each one of us. We are not only capable of lofty ideas and grand visions; we do this and not that, here and not there, with him and not with her and so on and so forth and so precisely and so specifically. This is what it means to live in time and space. To be specific and specified is part of the kind of life given to us. Mathematicians tell us that the movement of a butterfly in China affects the weather in England.

From what we are given in St Luke's gospel, how would we describe and account for the meeting that changed Zacchaeus's life? We could put it down to chance, to good luck, to an amazing stroke of fortune. He could have stayed at home or been at work when Jesus passed through that day. As an important official he needn't have risked making an undignified fool of himself, so anxious and in such a hurry and finishing up a tree. But he had heard that Jesus would be in town that day and he wanted to go and take a look at him. He did all this and Jesus had recognised him, called him by his name even, and

invited himself to his house.

As St Luke tells the story, Zacchaeus and Jesus do not approach each other in the same way. We are not told why Zacchaeus made such an effort to see Jesus. We do not know why it mattered to Zacchaeus to act in such an extraordinary way on whatever knowledge he had of Jesus. We are not told what brought him to such joy and such a public witness. Once up in his tree, Zacchaeus could only wait and see.

Not so with Jesus. He is certain that he knows who Zacchaeus is and calls him by his correct name. Jesus tells him that he must stay with him in his house. And it has to be done today. In their actual meeting, all the initiative is with Jesus. For Jesus, the man up the tree did not go unnoticed, wanting to be with Zacchaeus does not seem like a chance invitation, and it has to be done quickly and today, not tomorrow or next month. It must be so, as destiny and freedom interplay. Always be on the lookout for a small resounding word, 'dei' in the Greek of the synoptic gospels; 'it must be', 'it has to be'. We have it in verse 5. Jesus tells Zacchaeus to hurry down from the tree, and says he must stay with him today.

'God hides His providence, yet carries it forward'. This was said in a sermon preached by Newman here in Oxford.

That God hides his providence yet carries it forward, could well be a summary of today's gospel. From our human point of view what we do in a lifetime of innumerable choices and decisions, and why we do it, will never be completely clear. We see much through a glass darkly, and this incomplete seeing includes our self-knowledge. We are present in full knowledge and consent in some of our actions and not in others, we can never calculate with precision the significance for ourselves and for others of all that we do or say, we need to allow for chance and coincidence and luck in our lives. What effect may these words of mine have on those who chance or want to come across them on the information superhighway? Everything that happens is caused, but we do not always know by what and for what purpose.

Zacchaeus availed himself of whatever he could understand and was open to be taken beyond it. Whatever calculations and expectations he had made before meeting Jesus were taken over by one who acted with certainty. The poem by Elizabeth Jennings continues:

Even when all small answers build up to
Protection of my spirit, still I hear
Big answers striving for their overthrow.

Our God is a God who hides as well as reveals himself, yet his providence is unfailing. We do not see all the workings of providence not because it is not there but because our knowledge is severely limited. Even when hidden, God carries his providence forward. Whatever hesitant perception Zacchaeus had concerning the direction of his life was carried forward as his steps broke into a run.

He ran up to the tree, he rushed down in a hurry from it. The nearer he was to Jesus the more clearly he acted and understood. His life would need reshaping, his career prospects redefining. He was now at home with Jesus.

Nuclear Radiation: Facts and Fears

Peter E. Hodgson

There is widespread public anxiety about the effects of nuclear radiations, particularly concerning the cases of childhood leukaemia near nuclear plants. Seven cases occurred in Seascale in Cumbria near the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield from 1955 to 1983. This number seemed to be much greater than would be expected by chance, and received much publicity. It was, however, very difficult to understand how these cases could be blamed on Sellafield, since the amount of nuclear radiation released is far smaller than the natural background.

A possible mechanism was suggested in 1987 by Gardner, who postulated that the children developed leukaemia as a result of their father's exposure to nuclear radiation. He collected statistics that showed a significant correlation between paternal radiation dose and leukaemic children. This led to several Court cases in which families sought compensation from British Nuclear Fuels, the company operating the plant.

The Gardner hypothesis has such serious implications for the nuclear industry that many further investigations were made. These were on the actual process whereby paternal irradiation could lead to childhood leukaemia, the observations of leukaemia in the children of survivors of the atomic bombing of Japan, and more extensive studies of leukaemia around nuclear plants. The results of these studies have