

Ok, so we're going to look at this Bible passage Luke 19:1-10.

[Reading]

A very well-known passage there from Luke chapter 19.

This story reminds me that people love to put labels on other people, in fact we even have the label described that was, like, metaphorically pinned on Zacchaeus – did anybody hear, What was the label that was given to him? “Sinner” - that was imposed on him and it was given to him and why do they do it? Well, so often we use labels and we might use them: there might be a naughty child in our class – or we might even have been the naughty child in the class – and the problem is when that label's imposed on you about you – I don't know about you but if a label like that's imposed on me, there's something inside me that says “if you're going to give me that label, I'm going to live up to it.” You know what I mean and there's sometimes an element where you put a label on someone that can push them into a corner to almost fulfil whatever that label is. That person might be the loud mouth who lives down our street, or the naughty child in the school, or whatever else is a label that gets imposed. But I think the worst things about labelling people is that firstly it encourages us to think of ourselves as better than the person we're imposing the label on.

So the crowds when they looked at Zacchaeus and said “He's got Jesus who's gone to be in the home of a sinner. Jesus hasn't come to my house. Why is he going to the home of that sinner?” because the people thought they were better than Zacchaeus, they thought they were better than him. And the other thing that putting labels on people causes us to think is that we can believe that that person with the label can never ever change. In our minds that person will always be that way, and it can be incredibly hard to get rid of a negative label. Even though Zacchaeus made amazing promises: “If I stolen money from anyone, I will give them back not just what I've stolen, not just twice the amount I've stolen...” How much was he going to give back? Four times the amount. And you know I bet none of those righteous people who were the crowd in this passage, none of them were thinking they'd done anything wrong to be able to have to pay anyone back; and yet Zacchaeus realised he had lived in a wrong way, but didn't just want to put it right he wanted to be generous to those that he had taken from in the past.

The danger is that if we keep our labels in our minds we will not let those labels be challenged, but Jesus sees beyond the label. And there are so many labels that people have when Jesus comes across them. Some people were labelled like Zacchaeus as a “Sinner” or as a “tax collector”. Some people were labelled as a “beggar” - someone who was begging for money from other people; a woman was labelled as a “Samaritan” woman, a wicked woman who had had many husbands, but the man she was living with now, what not her husband. Or even a “Leper” - someone who obviously if they're a good person they would never have caught leprosy, so God must have given them leprosy because they're such bad people. But actually Jesus looked beyond all those labels and he saw the person underneath. Jesus believed that everyone can change.

But so often what stops people changing is that sense of self-righteousness – that actually we have to be so careful that we don't think we're so good that actually God doesn't need to change me. The difference with Zacchaeus was he knew he needed to change. And I think we need to keep that in mind as well. We may seek to live as good people but we still need to be changed. There

are ways in which our lives aren't reflecting God's love and God's goodness. And I want to leave you with this question: what are the labels that we have used about other people, and what are the labels being used by other people about us? And maybe there are people we need to forgive for the labels they've given us, and there maybe ways in which we need to turn away from labels we've imposed on other people.

As we just take a moment to reflect the band is going to just bring up a song, a beautiful song, (I think we've had a few times before at Woodside) and it's called "The Father's song". And I just invite you, we're going to stay seated, and we're going to listen to these words:

[Band plays "The Father's song" by Matt Redman, 2000]

The Father's song is written on our hearts. Just take those words deep into your own hearts and minds right now. We reject the labels that are imposed on us, labels that are so often of judgement and inequality and lack of understanding, and instead we hear the song that the father sings over us. Each one of us, the father says "You are my child – you are my daughter, you are my son – and I love you." Jesus died for each one of us personally, and we just take those words deep in own hearts right now. Amen

Amen.

It was supposed to be a surprise, but it is so difficult to get things stuck under chairs when you've got gloves on and I was getting all in a mess in the end I asked Moses for some help, and so both of us got sellotape stuck over selves (thank you to Moses for helping me to get it), so it probably won't be a surprise to most of you, but under your chair you will find not a label but a promise from God: so I invite you to (we had gloves on so you won't be catching any virus from them) take your promise from under your chair and I invite you to turn to somebody close to you (but not too close), somebody who is 2m away (unless they're in your household) and say that promise to that person, ok? So turned that person. And I've got my promise here and I'm going to share my promise with David and I'm going to come over to David and say, "David, the word of God says to you: I cannot be separated from the love of God," and that's a promise for you, but I can't give it to you because I've touched it but it's a promise for you anyway. Ok, so don't give your promise, but read your promise to the other person...[promises read]...Ok, when you've read your promises: remember we don't have labels but we do have promises from God that we belong to him, that we cannot be separated from his love whatever happened in our lives.