

Called to be transformed...

(Romans 12:1-8 and Luke 19:1-10)

James Parsons – 23 August 2020

There's no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic of the last few months has brought about changes.

Many unwelcome changes – the pandemic has had a devastating effect on people's lives and livelihoods, their health and, for some, in this current season, their holidays too.

We've experienced changes in the way we do our shopping – queuing and one-way systems, shopping online and home deliveries.

Many have experienced changes in the way they work – queuing and one-way systems, Teams and Zoom meetings, online and home working.

We've experienced changes in the way we do church – for Tidenham Church on Sunday there is a booking and a one-way system, there are Facebook and Zoom Life Groups, Zoom PCC meetings, online services and home worship.

We don't know for how long we'll have to live with these changes. We don't know if some of these changes will be permanent. These are changing and uncertain times.

But as Christians we do know that we can place our trust in our unchanging and certain God.

Despite unwelcome changes there have been some welcome changes too.

In the earlier weeks especially there was less traffic, less smelly pollution and less noise meaning brighter and clearer birdsong. Skies have often been devoid of airplane trails meaning a brighter and clearer blue sky.

Many have reconnected with nature, getting out into the countryside to walk and explore the local paths or spending more time in the garden, enjoying the birds and the butterflies.

I wonder whether, if you've been in the garden, you've been growing flowers, fruit and vegetables. If so, you'll know that there can't be butterflies without caterpillars. For most gardeners (and farmers) the caterpillar is a pest – they are voracious feeders, stomachs on legs – inflicting severe damage to leaves and crops.

But if there's one thing we can learn from a caterpillar, it is that glorious change is possible!

The transformation of a caterpillar to a butterfly is a truly wonderful and amazing phenomenon. It is a vivid picture of the biblical concept of transformation. The name for this radical change is *metamorphosis*. Yes, a Greek word from which *metamorphoo* (-phoo is pronounced fa-o) is derived, meaning **transformed** and used twice in the Bible.

The first is Romans 12:2 that we heard earlier: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The other is 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being **transformed** into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

These two verses talk about the change that takes place in us when we believe in Jesus Christ, receive his Holy Spirit, and grow to be like him. But to grow to be like him requires that we know him first.

An immediate **transformation** happens when we are saved.

Children, and perhaps adults too, love the story of Zacchaeus; I know I do. It’s a great story to act out.

Zacchaeus, a tax collector, a chief tax collector no less. It seems that, as we read the Gospels, being a tax collector is synonymous with being a sinner, at least in the eyes of the Pharisees as well as the people of Jericho. If this was the case, was Zacchaeus chief of sinners too?

Not only this, Zacchaeus was wealthy. He was rich. And from what we know from earlier stories in Luke’s Gospel, being rich doesn’t bode well for Zacchaeus.¹

But, if there’s one thing we can learn from the story of Zacchaeus, it is that glorious change is possible!

Firstly, even though it was Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus, he had run ahead and climbed the tree to see him, it was Jesus who reached out to Zacchaeus.

You know, I believe that Jesus is calling each of us, each of you, by name. He knows you and loves you. You are not just an anonymous person in the crowd or a bystander. Whether you are short or tall, rich or poor, Jesus is calling you, he’s calling you by your name.

And Jesus is inviting himself to stay with us. The old Sunday School song goes, “and now Zacchaeus you come down, for I’m coming to your house for tea.” Poetic license? Perhaps, but in Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”² Jesus invites himself back to Zac’s house; Jesus wants to spend time with Zac, eat with him, get to know him and for Zac to know Jesus.

¹ It’s only in the previous chapter of Luke that a certain ruler asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Despite living what appears to have been a good and upright life Jesus tells him, it’s not enough, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor.” At this, we read, the man was very sad, because he had great wealth. I think we can safely assume that this man did not do as Jesus asked, at least, not at that point in time.

² When this verse from Revelation is portrayed in art it’s quite common for the door at which Jesus is knocking to be shown with no handle on the outside. The handle is on the inside. Our side. Jesus doesn’t force his way in; it is for us to accept the invitation of Jesus and welcome him into our lives.

Secondly, Zacchaeus responds.

Zacchaeus doesn't stay in the tree and make excuses – He didn't say, "but I'm not good enough," "my house isn't tidy (although Zac, no doubt, has servants to do the housework)," "I don't have enough in for tea (although his servants would be doing the baking)." It was undignifying enough for Zacchaeus to run and climb a tree, in his robes, in the first place. Climbing down again was another matter!

We don't know what Jesus said to Zacchaeus as they walked back to Zac's place. If Luke was told, he has chosen not to record it for us. It doesn't matter. It was between just the two of them. I like that. But I wonder whether the people who saw this muttered because they couldn't hear their conversation. What was Jesus was saying to him? In their view Jesus shouldn't even be a guest of a sinner – it wasn't valid.

Thirdly, Zacchaeus acknowledges Jesus as Lord and demonstrates repentance by offering restoration for past sins. Unlike the rich ruler in a previous encounter with Jesus who wanted to keep hold of his wealth, Zacchaeus gives away half his wealth to the poor and is prepared to compensate those he's cheated. We're not told whether Zacchaeus makes any other changes. Does he remain a tax collector but change his practices? We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus validates him: "Today I must stay at your house," becomes "Today salvation has come to this house."

Jesus is calling you by name. He is inviting you to accept him into your life. How are you responding? Are you making excuses, or are you welcoming him gladly? Are you prepared to repent, to accept Jesus as your Lord? If so, in 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" Zacchaeus has been transformed!

Our **final transformation** will occur when, as believers, we are raised from the dead and God gives us the capacity to experience and enjoy his presence forever.

In his letter to the Philippians³ Paul writes, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." What a wondrous transformation to look forward to.

Meanwhile, in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, the verse I mentioned earlier, Paul is talking about **ongoing transformation**.

Yes, the old has gone! Yes, the new has come! But we are to continue being transformed.

We are to be transformed from being conformed. That's right, we're to be non-conformists! We're to be counter-cultural, not that every aspect of society and culture is inherently bad, far from it.

³ Philippians 3:20-21

But it means keeping on renewing our minds, ensuring that we're "*not being squeezed into the shape of the present age.*"⁴ It means "*not becoming so well-adjusted to our culture that we fit into it without even thinking.*"⁵

Let's flit back to the caterpillar for a moment.

I said the caterpillar is a voraciously feeder. It needs to eat voraciously to bulk up and fuel its transition to the butterfly. So, I wonder, and I ask you (and me): what are you feeding your minds on? Are the TV programmes and films you regularly watch healthy and nourishing you? Are the newspapers, magazines and books you read fuel your minds to have good thoughts, or negative thoughts, healthy desires or unhealthy ones? And does your use of social media form within your mind worldly views or Godly views?

Just as we need to eat healthily to have a healthy body, we also need to feed our minds with wholesome mind food. We need a balanced diet of mind food. If our minds are to be renewed by the persuasion of the Holy Spirit, we need to feed our minds with the right food.

Where do we find this food? God provides us with this food – he's given us the bible, it's his word, and he's given it to us for our teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.⁶

Just as we regularly feed our body can I suggest that we also regularly feed our minds? The Psalmist says, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but (blessed is the one) whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night."⁷ You can read this for yourself in Psalm 1.

We are to take delight in Gods word. We're to read it. We're to meditate on it – that's when the Holy Spirit can persuade us or not whether we need to change anything. And we're to do this regularly. Just as we eat food for our bodies regularly, we're blessed if we meditate on God's word "day and night". Do you grab your phone first thing in the morning? Or put on the radio or television? What is the last thing you are feeding your minds with as you go to bed?

And if you still need to be convinced, then read Psalm 119 – virtually all of its 176 verses say something of the importance of God's word for living.

Romans 12:2 ends with a promise, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of you mind." Is followed by, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

What is God's will? God's will is that we are transformed into the likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ. We are called to be transformed to Christlikeness.

Praise God that such a glorious transformation awaits us! Amen

⁴ Based on Tom Wright's translation: *New Testament for Everyone*

⁵ Based on *The Message* paraphrase

⁶ See 2 Timothy 3:16

⁷ Psalm 1:1-2