

### **“Christian GPS (Gospel Positioning System)” – Lk 19:1-10 – Oct 31/04**

Most of you know, I’m sure, that Elizabeth and I have just returned from a short but fantastic trip to Korea and Japan. It’s a long flight both ways, and I had lots of time to reflect on how aviation over the Pacific Ocean has changed tremendously in the last fifty years. Where once propeller-driven airplanes struggled at low altitudes through all the clouds and turbulence for hour after hour, now we cruise comfortably more than eight kilometers up in the clear sky at speeds in excess of one thousand kilometers per hour, calmly munching goodies and watching movies. Watching also the slow but steady progress of a little airplane moving across a map of the world on the channel that shows our real-time location – not to mention our altitude, and groundspeed, and outside temperature, and times. In the ‘good old days’ they wouldn’t have displayed such stuff even if there had been those neat screens in the backs of the seats, mostly because in those days the real location of the airplane at any time was at best a wild guess.

The difference is a navigation system known as GPS, short for Global Positioning System. I won’t go into all the details of how it works, because I know for most of you your eyes would soon glaze over, but suffice it to say that it is based on a bunch of satellites in low earth orbit with VERY precise clocks that constantly send out their position by radio signal. Receivers on the ground pick up those signals, and by measuring the teensy-weensy time differences in receiving them are able to calculate with great accuracy the exact distance from each satellite. When the receiving computer has signals from enough of the satellites, it can calculate with great accuracy the exact position on the earth.

This technology, a dream only a few decades ago, is now so readily available you can buy handheld units for hiking for less than \$200. Some cars even come equipped with it – for example the GM OnStar system. You may remember Jin Sup and Tae Jung who were students here, and who we met with in Seoul – Jin Sup works for the LG Corporation working on that very system. Many of you know Toshie Wilson as well, and so you would not have been surprised either to see her in Nagoya arguing with the voice in the computer about which way to go!

I had plenty of time to think on the airplanes about the benefits of modern navigation systems, and even plenty of time to think about how they echo the navigation pronouncement from Jesus about being lost in our text from Luke.

We’re all pretty familiar with the story of Zacchaeus in Luke’s gospel, partly because of the way Luke includes human-interest details. We can easily picture Zacchaeus bobbing up and down, trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus through the crowd, and finally climbing a sycamore tree. Not just any tree, but a sycamore, Luke tells us. I don’t think there’s any special significance to it being a sycamore tree other than by including that little detail Luke generates instantly in our mind a fairly complete picture of the event. Luke adds another little detail to complete the picture, a detail that is surprisingly enigmatic: “because he was short in stature”. Now we instantly assume that Luke meant that Zacchaeus was short, but the original Greek can just as legitimately be read that it was Jesus who was short in stature. We’re not happy with that, are we? Indeed, the early church had some ongoing discussions about whether or not Jesus was short. I’ll bet you’re squirming in the pew right now just because I’m mentioning that Jesus might have been short, as if that would make a difference about him embodying the power of God within himself.

In any event, Zach scoots up the tree, and the rest is history. Jesus calls to him by name, invites himself and the gang over for supper and for the night. Zach is well pleased, but the crowd is not at all happy about this, mumbling and grumbling about Jesus hanging out in the house of a chief tax collector, and a rich one at that. The tension and the conflict rises, as the people clearly saw Zacchaeus as having gotten rich off their backs, and as being not just a toady of the hated Romans but even a

sinful collaborator. Jesus' behaviour in not only associating with such a sinner was radical enough, but to actually stay over at his house was bordering on the dangerously scandalous.

But even more than being a story of conflict, this is a story of radical, even outrageous behaviour by Jesus, for not only did he stay at the house of a sinner, he pronounced Zacchaeus as a true 'son of Abraham', as fine a compliment as one could pay to a Jew. More even than that, Jesus declared that salvation had come to his house – which would include all who lived there. And to justify his radical actions, Jesus made a proclamation, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." That's pretty radical, isn't it, for one who is One with God? Not to sit imperiously in some temple or other central location waiting for the lost to not only find themselves but to then find him, but actively being engaged in a Search and Rescue operation, seeking the lost, and saving them. That is an extremely radical story of mercy and grace!

And who are the lost he is seeking? We all are, or have been, or continue to be from time to time. Not primarily the physically lost, although I'm sure Jesus has been involved in the rescue of many who were physically lost. We who live in Vancouver, and especially on the North Shore, know how easy it is to take a wrong turn on a trail and become hopelessly lost in minutes. Many tourists don't recognize the danger, and become lost like this without proper clothing, food or water. Some have even died as a result, even while looking down at the lights of the city.

Some people who are lost are able to call attention to themselves by lighting signal fires. I can't help thinking of the scene in the movie "Cast Away", when Tom Hanks finally gets a fire going on the beach, proclaiming loudly, "me, I have created fire!" Sometimes such attention-getting is disastrous for the lost person, and even others. Last year a hunter who was lost in California lit a fire to draw attention to himself – and created the largest wildfire in California history, burning some 110,000 acres and killing 15 people in the process.

But the lost of whom Jesus is speaking when he declares he has come to seek them and to save them are the spiritually lost, those who for whatever reasons have either drifted from or worse yet been pushed away from a warm and sustaining relationship with God. The lost are those who have lost direction, lost hope, lost purpose, and are unable to find their own way back into a meaningful relationship with God, and often with other people as well. These lost will sometimes also signal for help, often with self-destructive behaviour that isolates them even further from those who want to retain their sense of righteousness through isolation. It is a vicious spiral, one that ends in lack of life, certainly lack of the abundant life promised in Christ, and too often in death.

There is, however, thanks be to God, a source of help for us as we join the Search and Rescue team that carries on with Christ's mission to "seek out and save the lost". This source of help is what I call "Christian GPS", and was developed as part of the Reformation – which is appropriate to acknowledge since today is Reformation Sunday. The Reformers felt that the whole church had gotten 'lost', drifting away from the original message of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God through his grace in Jesus Christ, and becoming lost in a tangle of church rules, regulations, politics and corruption.

This "Christian GPS" is useful not only for helping the lost once they are lost, but can also help people avoid getting lost in the first place. Instead of "Global Positioning System", however, the GPS here stands for "Gospel Positioning System". In the "Christian Gospel Positioning System" we have a spiritual navigation system that reminds us of just how close we are to God – close enough that He would send his only Son to rescue us; with constant reminders of His grace and mercy, assuring us that even when we feel lost and alone and separated from God, his Holy Spirit continues to act as a beacon within us and for us, giving us both impetus and direction to return to Him.

The Christian GPS developed during the Reformation was a renewed respect for and broad personal use of the Scriptures, the very place where we find the written ‘maps’ that trace the paths of the early Israelites as they moved toward God; the very place where we find the descriptions of the paths that Jesus trod as He moved toward the cross and beyond in his Resurrection; the very place where we find enough detail to draw maps of the travels of the apostles as they carried the good news of God’s saving action in Christ to the whole world. The Scriptures form the foundation of our Gospel Positioning System, and give us survival instructions of all kinds, including the story of the divine Rescuer who knows us every bit as well as he knew Zacchaeus, and who is able to find us in our lostness, and call us by name as well, and invite himself to dwell within us. Our Scriptures provide us with a Search and Rescue manual as well, with instructions on how to find the lost by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting the lonely, healing the sick. Instructions on how to gently guide the lost back into the warm, friendly and reassuring ‘recovery tent’, and indeed on how to make the church be such a recovery tent.

“The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost”, Jesus proclaimed, and seek out and find the lost he has done, including us. Now it’s our turn and opportunity to carry on that rescue mission, taking what we learn in Scripture of God’s grace and mercy in Christ, and carrying the message of rescue and redemption like a searchlight, that all who are lost may be found and welcomed back into the bosom of our Lord and Rescuer Jesus Christ.