

Listening to Rural Voices in Tanzania: the Zacchaeus Episode, Luke 19:1-10

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ABSTRACT

The reading and interpretation of the Zacchaeus episode gives rise to diverse viewpoints among biblical scholars. Some commentators classify it as a vindication story in which Jesus is depicted as striving to relieve Zacchaeus of the social stereotyping that characterised and labelled him as a notorious sinner because of his “despised profession”. On the other hand, there are other commentators who use the concept of conversion as a window for reading the same episode. This leads us to examine how rural dwellers read and interpret Lk 19:1-10. This article is an attempt to listen to rural people in Mbinga (Tanzania) and to enable them to engage meaningfully with the Zacchaeus debate.

Introduction

Jean-Marc Ela in his article “Christianity and Liberation in Africa” makes a poignant claim as he asks: “How can a person read the Bible and leave a people in a state of poverty and marginalization?”¹ Taking the path of Ela, one may still ask: “What meaning do people give to their reading of the Word of God?” Questions such as these motivated my reading of the Zacchaeus story (Lk 19:1-10) with a Small Christian Community² (hereafter SCC) from my home rural parish Maguu in Mbinga Diocese, Tanzania. The aim was to take part in the Zacchaeus debate, conscientise the poor and awaken in them a sense of responsibility, integrity, solidarity and community. The poor know their social reality better than any

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- 1 Jean-Marc Ela, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa”, in *Paths of African Theology* edited by R. Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 145.
 - 2 The formation of SCCs in Mbinga Diocese has somehow imitated the Ujamaa system of “Nyumba Kumi” which literally means “ten houses” under one leadership known as “a ten-cell leader” (Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation* [Lund: Lund University Press, 1988]), 69. It allows 10 to 12 families to form one SCC where its members interact with each other on a daily basis (Christopher Mwoleka, “Small Christian Communities and Human Promotion”, in *Ujamaa and Christian Communities*, Spearhead No. 45, edited by C. Mwoleka & J. Healey (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1976), 20.
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