The Good Zacchaeus

The Amazon river, the thirsty town and the missionary money collector.

The missionary smiles as she collects money from the people of La Union, Nauta. This is a thirsty community surrounded by water. Nauta sits on the banks of the Marañón River, a tributary of the Amazon, but its water is not safe to drink. And for the neighbourhood of La Union, the water is even more dangerous. The community gets water from wells, contaminated by run-off from nearby latrines. It’s impossible to feel safe when the water you’re drinking could kill you. It’s a life lived with unavoidable risk. But the missionary pockets the money, says thank you, and moves on to the next house.

Her name is Laura-Lee Lovering. The money collector. She’s been in Peru for eight years. She is a BMS World Mission worker serving at a community and theology facility called Nauta Integral Mission Training Centre (NIMTC). A BMS-founded centre that, apart from all the theological and practical training it provides, helps the community of La Union feel safer. Laura-Lee and our local partners knew they had to work with the people of La Union to get them clean water. So they dug a new well together. A clean one, one they knew would be safe to drink. For the first time, people in La Union had water piped into their homes, and they didn’t have to worry about getting ill from drinking dangerous water. A community water committee was created to ensure the new system was properly looked after by the people in the neighbourhood. And the committee elected Laura-Lee as their modern-day Zacchaeus.

Alejandro runs the project like it was always his. He’s a retiree from La Union and Laura-Lee’s right hand man on the project. He knows how to fix things and he’s there every morning turning on the water and is on hand to help with the maintenance. “Just seeing his own sense of pride and ownership of the project is so satisfying,” says Laura. But you can’t fix a leaking pipe with a sense of ownership alone. And that’s where Laura-Lee the money collector comes in.

To keep the project sustainable, and to make sure the people of La Union never have to go back to drinking dirty water, each participating household pays a small fee into a central pot. The money contributes to maintaining the pipes and pumps, and it’s cheaper than buying water from the shops. It builds a sense of ownership – the community is fully invested in the project. Literally. This is why Laura-Lee goes door-to-door and collects the payments from her neighbours. She’s a good Zacchaeus, collecting money with their blessing and permission, and never taking too much. And it’s helped her get to know her neighbours. She’s not just going to collect their money, she’s laughing with them, chatting to them. Witnessing among them.

“It’s been really special to get to know the community and helping them get to know me as well,” says Laura-Lee. When she’s away, she knows the people of La Union won’t need to go back to drinking dirty water. She knows that the project is in the capable hands of the community, of people like Alejandro, and that, with the Christian community at NIMTC there, their access to living water will never run dry.