

3rd November 2019 (31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Wisdom 11:22-12:2; Psalm 144(145):1-2,8-11,13b-14; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10.

'Seeking out and saving what was lost.'

In today's gospel reading we are introduced to three different characters: Jesus, Zacchaeus and the crowd. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus passes through Jericho, a very important town in the Jewish social milieu, and as the crowds gather around Jesus to listen to what he has to say and be healed, we are introduced to Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is a marginalised member of the Jewish society. The public consider him a sinner because of his trade. As a tax-collector, he is in the employ of the detested Roman occupiers, tasked with collecting taxes from his Jewish counterparts. Tax collectors were renowned for collecting more than their due, and were regarded as thieves. Zacchaeus is a high-ranking tax-collector, perhaps the chief collector in the area, and presumably has made his money by stealing from his compatriots. Due to its geographic position, commerce passed through Jericho, making it a lucrative place for tax-collectors!

Like the other tax-collector we heard about in the parable last Sunday, Zacchaeus wants to have some type of relationship with God. Hearing that Jesus is in town, he is anxious at least to get to see him. Not only is he marginalised because of his work, he is also marginalised because of his low stature and could not see Jesus because of the crowds. We can perhaps imagine this wealthy, short man running through the crowd, unsuccessfully trying to have a peek at Jesus.

Zacchaeus finally decides to scramble up the branches of a sycamore tree to gain some height; a wealthy man goes out of his way to get a glimpse of salvation, and is rewarded! Jesus invites himself to dinner in his home.

Last week the sinful tax-collector asking for God's mercy, was juxtaposed with a 'holy' Pharisee who observed all the details of the law, but who condemned those he considered to be sinners. Today the tax-collector, looking for salvation, is contrasted by the 'holy' and judgemental nameless crowd around Jesus. *'They,'* who have come out to listen to Jesus and perhaps even be healed, look down on Zacchaeus and think him unworthy to host Jesus at his house. *'They'* complained, because Jesus went to the house of a sinner.

Last week we were told that it was the tax-collector who returned home reconciled with God; this week Jesus declares that salvation had come to Zacchaeus' house, because he too was a child of Abraham, a member of the people of God!

Today's story comes as another strong reminder for us not to judge and condemn our sisters and brothers, but to accept and reach out to them with the same attitude of Jesus. It is very interesting that the Pharisee from last week's gospel and the crowd today, both of whom think of themselves too holy to associate with the sinful tax-collectors, are clearly at odds with the way God looks at us. While those considering themselves to be holy seek to distance themselves from sinners, God declares that he has actually come to seek out and save those who are lost.

If I want to be a child of God, I need to take on God's attitude and be open to those who I consider to be greater sinners than myself. If I consider myself to be holy, then I need to show gratitude that, only through God's grace, I have managed to keep myself clean. It is certainly not my job to criticise or condemn those who I think are not living a holy life. What seems sinful in my human eyes, is in fact an opening towards God. It is the person who approaches God with humility that enjoys God's merciful love and salvation, not the one who looks down on his sisters and brothers condemning them for their sinful ways.

'Who am I to judge?' I can only judge myself in front of God, recognise my sinfulness and, like Zacchaeus, be anxious to listen to God's word and to welcome him into my home. I would be very wise to pray for my own conversion to God first, and then to pray for the conversion of those who, like me, are also sinners and need God's mercy.

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