

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 19:1-10 in its biblical context

After discussing how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus once more takes the twelve aside and, for the third time, warns them that he is going to be killed but that he will rise on the third day. Luke tells us, “they understood nothing for this; the word remained hidden from them and they failed to comprehend what he said” (Luke 18:34). Luke has once again reminded us of what awaits Jesus in Jerusalem and of the urgency of his mission.

Awareness of the story of the reluctant rich man and of Jesus’ third warning of his coming suffering and death helps us better the story of Zacchaeus. A large crowd has gathered as Jesus passes through Jericho. Among the crowd are Zacchaeus, “a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man,” as well as others who thoroughly disapprove of Zacchaeus. Tax collectors were disliked by their fellow Jews because they were collecting taxes on behalf of the Roman occupiers. Zacchaeus’s income would have been a percentage of the taxes he collected. That he was rich added insult to injury.

Jesus, of course, knows what people think of tax collectors. Nevertheless, when Jesus sees Zacchaeus up in the tree he makes a point of reaching out to him – he even invites himself to Zacchaeus’s house. As has happened many times before, Jesus is criticised for eating with sinners. Zacchaeus responds immediately to Jesus’ request and greets Jesus not only with joy, but with repentance. He must already be aware of Jesus’ teaching on the proper use of wealth. Zacchaeus is a great contrast to the sad rich man that Luke has just presented. On the other hand, he is much like the “sinful woman” who washed Jesus’ feet, and like the two debtors in the parable Jesus told to the Pharisee who objected to Jesus’ accepting that woman’s gift, Zacchaeus has repented not to earn Jesus’ love but in response to his realisation that Jesus already loves him.

Notice that Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he must stay at his house. There is a sense of urgency about that word. As we mentioned, Luke has been building up a sense of urgency as Jesus’ trip to Jerusalem proceeds, constantly reminding the reader, through Jesus’ predictions of his passion, of what awaits him there. Time is growing short to complete his mission. Jesus must invite himself to Zacchaeus’s house because Jesus must do his Father’s will by seeking out the lost. Zacchaeus has accepted the good news that Jesus must give: God loves sinners and calls them to repentance.

Reflection

The gospel account for his Sunday contains an interesting human touch – a curious short, rich man puts aside his social status and does something not very dignified: he climbs a sycamore tree to see Jesus better!

The tax collector Zacchaeus, impelled by his desire to see Jesus, makes great effort to seek him out. Jesus responds to Zacchaeus’ earnest enthusiasm by doing for him the very thing Jesus came to do: “to seek out and to save what was lost.” The dramatic encounter brings to light something about both persons which escapes the grumbling crowd: Zacchaeus is capable of changing, and Jesus is more than an object of curiosity – he is the saviour of sinners.

Because of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus receives Jesus into his own home “with joy”. Moreover, this encounter brings a changed behaviour in Zacchaeus: he shares his wealth with the poor and mends his sinful ways. Because of this, Jesus says to him, “Today salvation has come to his house.” The dignity of means and

status is nothing compared to the dignity God bestows on forgiven sinners who are saved.

There is another interesting detail in this gospel. Jesus “intended to pass through the town,” but “must stay” after encountering Zacchaeus. Jesus is the Son of Man who has come “to seek and to save what was lost.” Jesus’ ministry is hindered neither by wealth nor status, but by his passionate desire to bring salvation to anyone who comes seeking. Jesus’ very identity and passion for others’ salvation compels him to stay. Perhaps it was Jesus’ very passion for others’ salvation which aroused in Zacchaeus the passion to forget his dignity and climb that tree. This leaves us with an interesting question: Would we go to the same heights as Zacchaeus to encounter Jesus, change, and be saved?

This story of Zacchaeus reminds us that we sinners must come seeking Jesus if we are to have a saving encounter with divine mercy. Sometimes it may seem to many of us that our seeking Jesus is far more difficult than climbing a tree to see and encounter him! Perhaps we are having difficulty with prayer and God seems to have abandoned us. Perhaps we are being tempted in a particular and prolonged way to do something radically against gospel values. Perhaps so much is going wrong in our lives that we are disposed to be bitter and resentful or vindictive. These are times when we can come closest to God by acknowledging our human frailty and giving ourselves over to God’s care and mercy. Sometimes just a refocus of our attention away from the difficulty toward Jesus who loves us is enough to remain faithful and encounter Jesus in a new and life-giving way.

Questions for Faith-Sharing Groups

- If Jesus said to you, “I must come to your house,” what would be your response?
- In what ways has Jesus already come to your house?
- What have you done in order to encounter Jesus?
- Do you think it is reasonable to believe that God loves and forgives sinners? Why?
- How do you permit others to change and have a “second chance” like Zacchaeus?