

## Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time C/2019

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's mercy and forgiveness. They show that God is merciful and forgiving. They invite us to entrust our lives to the mercy of God.

The first reading recalls the grandeur and the love of God in creating the universe and everything in it. It shows that everything remains in life by his will and because they belong to him. It also shows that God warns his people so they abandon their sins and believe in him.

What is behind this text is the affirmation of the bounty of God. There is also the affirmation of his continual desire to forgive sins and to preserve his creatures.

This text allows us to understand the point of today's Gospel in which Jesus welcomes the tax collector, Zacchaeus. First of all, the Gospel speaks of the trip of Jesus through the town of Jericho.

It speaks also of a certain Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus, but could not because of the crowd and of his short stature. Then, it explains what Zacchaeus did as he climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus.

After that, the Gospel reports the reaction of Jesus as he invited Zacchaeus to come down from the tree and then went to dine at his home. The Gospel equally gives the reaction of the people who started complaining about Jesus' attitude of welcoming of sinners. It reports also the pledge of Zacchaeus to give back what he had robbed from people. The Gospel ends with Jesus' statement that the Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today I want to talk about the abundant mercy of God. What do I mean by that? In order to better understand the point of Jesus and his critics, we have first to know the functioning of Israel society.

In fact, Israel was a very structured and religious society. It had many religious groups, like the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Sadducees and the zealots. Besides those groups, there were the publicans and the Tax collectors.

The tax collectors in particular were the despised of people because of their perceived greed and collaboration with the Romans occupiers. As they were collecting the tax, they manipulated the money for their benefit at the expense of their fellow Jews. For instance, they amassed personal wealth by demanding the tax payment beyond what was required. In that sense, they were not only cheating, but they also did not respect the Law of Moses.

For that reason, there was a general displeasure with them in society. They were considered as enemies of the nation, traitors and public sinners. They became wealthy by collaborating with Roman authorities at the expense of their own people.

The thing, however, is that the Pharisees along with other groups admitted that everyone is a sinner and in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. But, for the sin of the tax collectors, it was unforgivable because they were deliberately and persistently transgressing the Law without shame. That explains the low esteem they had in public opinion. However, in spite of this held opinion, Jesus will welcome them with joy and even dine with them, as we see in the case of Zacchaeus.

But, why is Jesus doing so? It is for a couple of reasons I want to share with you. First, Jesus wants to extend the kingdom of God to them and proclaim the message of salvation to them. It is like saying to them: “Straighten up your life and keep the law. Wake up from your sleep. Do not let yourself down; the kingdom of God is yours, too. I believe that is why Jesus says that this man, too, is a descendant of Abraham.

How great is this message! But also, how often did we not lock people in their sins and refuse to approach them or even to discourage them to be part of our circle of life because they were sinners. How true is all that even today!

The second reason is that God’s love is bigger than human sin. No doubt that God dislikes sins, but he loves sinners. When a sinner decides to get out of his situation of the past and changes, God welcomes him.

In other words, God does not lock people in their sins. He offers always and continually a second chance so that people come to salvation. That chance is what Zacchaeus was looking for. Now that it was given to him how could he not pledge to give back what he took from people?

The third reason is that Jesus wants to show us that God’s forgiveness is at hand for anyone willing it. Therefore, he is not afraid to welcome sinners and bring them God’s forgiveness. Such an attitude is exactly the opposite of what we do. That is why we are judgmental and harsh with the sinners.

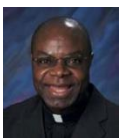
In other words, Jesus teaches us that the call to change for sinners is more effective when it comes from a person who has demonstrated that he truly loves and cares for them. As Pope Francis says “priests (should) be shepherds” and have the “odor of sheep” and not those who stay at a distance and distribute blame and condemnation. That is why the word of Jesus: “The Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost” should challenge each one of us.

The last reason why Jesus has gone to the house of Zacchaeus seems to me that he wanted to tell him in person that he has looked for happiness in the wrong place. Now God is willing to give him true happiness, which does not depend on human riches acquired through cheating, but rather in the peace of heart. It seems to me also that though Zacchaeus was a wealthy person, he was not happy. Something was missing him.

That is why he wanted to see Jesus, not necessarily by curiosity, but because he did not want to miss so great an opportunity of meeting someone who was not there in order to judge him, but to give him a chance to make peace with God. That is the reason why he said: half of my money I will give to the poor; where I have extorted I shall repay four times.

Let us, pray that God may help us to realize that he is our true happiness. Let us repent of our sins as God shows us his bounty and mercy! May he give us his peace! God bless you all!

**Wisdom 11: 22-12: 2; 2 Thessalonians 1: 11-2: 2; Luke 19: 1-10**



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