

## Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time C2022

The Gospel of this morning talks about the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus. In order to understand the deep meaning of this encounter, it is good to start with the context of Israel society.

Israel society, in fact, was a very structured society. Everything turned around the Law of Moses and God's Covenant. People had to make a clear decision in their lives in favor of God or against God, to live by his Law or independently from it.

To be with God meant to choose his Law, to respect it and to live by it whatever might be the circumstances of life in which one was involved. To live independently from the Law and without observing it was a sign that one does not care about God. Therefore he was a rebel and a sinner. That is why in Israel there was a strict division between the good and the bad, the righteous and the sinners.

But, as the whole society was religious, it meant also that bad people and sinners were rejected and hated by all. The list of the bad guys was long; it went from simple people not respecting the Law of Moses to the Jews collaborating with the Romans.

Unfortunately Zacchaeus was among that category of people because he was a tax collector. As such he was rejected, isolated and living in his own world, perhaps without friends than those of his profession. He was rich, but of the riches accumulated from fraud and extortion at the expense of his own people.

He certainly heard about Jesus and his teaching; in his heart he wanted to see him. What to do, then, in such a context of rejection and isolation? It is here that his imagination came to his help: to climb a sycamore tree. Why, then, to climb the tree? The Gospel says that because he was short in stature. But, I also believe that where our human nature comes short, God's grace can work miracles within us so that we come to salvation God intended for us. When we are open to God, when we sincerely look for him, whatever might be our sinful situation, he ends up coming to us and consoles us.

Now it becomes clear why that sycamore tree has existed. It was there for a purpose of serving to the salvation of a lost soul. I believe that everything that exists in the world has a purpose; it might be unknown to us, but it is not less real. Like the sycamore tree, we exist for the purpose for which God has created us. The husband you have is there for the purpose that God wanted to achieve in your life; the wife you have today is there for the purpose that God wanted to achieve in your life. The children you have are there for the purpose that God wanted to achieve in your life. Everything is grace; everything is providential. There is a reason why things exist even if we do not know why.

As Zacchaeus was yearning in his heart to see Jesus, he knew that life is full opportunities, but that one was unique; it was his; he did not want to miss it. In fact, he was not disappointed because Jesus stopped and looked at him and went to eat at his home. What a miracle? A rejected man, a lost soul and sinner becomes the host of his Lord without sin.

What Jesus has done for Zacchaeus, he can do it for me and for you; the clemency he has shown to Zacchaeus he can show it to you and me too. As he has done in the past, he does it even today because he is the same today, tomorrow and after tomorrow (Hebrews 13:8).

Now, let us come to serious things: Why did Jesus go to eat to the house of Zacchaeus who was a public sinner? He could not pretend that he did not know that he was one? No; he certainly knew everything; he saw the longing of his heart and responded to it with love, compassion and forgiveness.

Jesus went to the house of Zacchaeus in order to bring him the face of his Father, the lover of souls. When a soul is lost, the Father is sad; when a soul is rescued, the Father is happy. The Father has mercy on all; he overlooks people's sins so that they may repent. He rebukes offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in him.

By going to the house of Zacchaeus regardless of people's opinion, Jesus shows that God's mercy prevails over human sins. If it were not so, it would make no sense for him to go to the house of Zacchaeus while everybody held him as a public sinner. But it means also that even when society judges us as a public sinner or that it rejects someone as a notorious criminal because of the bad things he has done, that person still counts for God. God does not judge us in the same way that society does.

This point is very crucial for our relationship with God. We have to come to understand that God's love for us is unconditional. Even when we are bad persons, he still loves us. In that sense, no one has the right to detest himself because of bad things he has done in his life. No one has the right to detest some people because they are bad guys. I also believe that it is important to forgive ourselves because God forgives us. Whoever does not forgive himself for the bad he has done in his life will never appreciate God's forgiveness.

Does it mean that because God forgives us, the sinner shall dwell in his sins? No. The sinner has to change and abandon his bad ways. He has to make amends for his sins. That is exactly what Zacchaeus has done by pledging to give half of his riches to the poor and another half to make restitution for the fraud he practiced. That is why the more God forgives us, the more we have to repent of our sins.

Now let me conclude: Zacchaeus was a rich and successful man. Materially speaking, he had succeeded in his life and in his profession. However, in spite of his riches and success, he was not happy; something was missing in his life. That is the reason why he wanted to see Jesus. He was right, because Jesus alone can satisfy the hunger of our hearts. God alone can give us the true joy that nobody can take away from us. Let us, open up to him and yearn like Zacchaeus for our salvation. God bless you!

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



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