

31st Sunday of the Year (Year C)
(Wisdom 11:22-12:2 / Luke 19:1-10)
03.11.2013

We are told that *Zacchaeus was anxious to see what kind of man Jesus was*. His curiosity led him to climb a sycamore tree *to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passed by* on the way into Jericho.

The vision Zacchaeus was accorded went far beyond his hopes and expectations. Zacchaeus was given more than a glimpse of Jesus. He was accorded a grace of spiritual insight. He came to appreciate who Jesus really was.

Through the regard Jesus posed upon him, Zacchaeus was given not only to perceive but actually to enter into the very heart of what Jesus came to reveal: God's merciful love.

Through the insight afforded him, Zacchaeus was given to experience what Jesus calls *salvation*; what the psalmist calls *fullness of redemption*.

Yes, through his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus came to see that *with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption*.

Zacchaeus was led below the surface of things into their very essence.

In hosting Jesus in his home, Zacchaeus was given to welcome *the tender mercy of the heart of our God which has come to visit us*.

Our reading of today's gospel passage shows us how when Jesus saw Zacchaeus perched up the tree, He, the Lord, took the initiative to call Zacchaeus down and He invited Himself to stay at Zacchaeus' house.

Significantly, today's gospel passage which began outside, with Zacchaeus alone, cut off from others, perched up in a tree, ends inside Zacchaeus' house, with a gathering in which many participate as they dine with Jesus around the table in Zacchaeus' home.

I see the shift that takes place in today's gospel passage between its beginning (outside) and its end (inside) as very significant.

I see this shift of location as symbolic of the whole movement of this gospel story.

What we see taking place in this story is a movement from an external regard posed by Zacchaeus upon the man Jesus to an internalised experience of Jesus' identity as Saviour.

If *Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, catch a glimpse of Him*, the most significant regard in the story is the regard of mercy that Jesus poses upon Zacchaeus when he sees him.

In that regard Zacchaeus is given to recognise that the man Jesus is none other than the Christ: the one sent into this world with the mission to reconcile all people with God.

One can hardly read today's gospel passage without thinking of how Jesus framed His mission early on in Luke's gospel account when He stood up in the synagogue of Nazareth and declared that He was sent to bring the good news of freedom to all those who were held bound in whatever way in this world, with justice for the poor, with healing for the afflicted, with sight for the blind ...

In today's gospel story we see Jesus seeking out one who is lost, giving this man interior vision/insight, healing his woundedness ... and not only *his* brokenness, but that of all those like him who stand in need of God's mercy.

The people who need God's mercy, *we* who need God's mercy, are represented by that gathering of friends Zacchaeus has assembled in his house to meet with Jesus. All these people Jesus led into an experience of communion with Himself and with each other.

He does the same thing for us too as we gather here this morning to celebrate our Sunday Eucharist.

As the story progresses we are shown how Zacchaeus' meeting with Jesus wrought change in his life. The declaration Zacchaeus makes towards the end of today's gospel passage (about righting wrongs he has done) testifies to his engagement to live in better adjusted and more equitable relationships with others.

In the shift of location from outside (where Zacchaeus appears to be a lone figure) to inside (where many others are gathered around him) we see a more profound shift than a change of location hinted at.

What we have here is a movement from aloneness to all-one-ness: a movement from isolation to communion.

I find the place where Zacchaeus is said to stand before Jesus at the heart of the story to be symbolic of yet another very important shift that has taken place in his person.

We are told that Zacchaeus who had come down from the tree simply *stood his ground* before the Lord and the people gathered around him.

I see this observation as an indicator of the fact that Zacchaeus is now better situated within himself. I see it suggesting that he is now properly rooted in the ground of his being.

Previously Zacchaeus felt compelled to be perched on high, now he no longer feels the need to place himself at a height.

Would it be exaggerated to see Zacchaeus' former choice of position (to be perched up in the sycamore tree) as symbolic of his haughtiness - a haughtiness which was probably as much a compensation for his littleness as anything else?

We are told that he climbed the tree because he was small. But maybe the attention drawn to Zacchaeus' small stature was about more than his physical height. It may well have been that he was a man of low self-esteem - and because of this a man led to over-compensate and as a result act proudly.

We know only too well that there is a tendency within all of us to try to hide our smallness and make ourselves appear bigger than we are. This can lead us to project a proud image of ourselves when really what we feel inside is a painful littleness.

When it is said that *Zacchaeus stood his ground* is it not being implied that he came to see that he must hold himself in a stance of humility?

Just like Zacchaeus we are all called to be rooted in our earth, to stand before the Lord and others, true to ourselves in humility.

I think it fair to see all the shifts made in the course of today's gospel story as indicators of conversions we are called to live in our lives as much as Zacchaeus was in his.

Like Zacchaeus we are all called to conversion from an external regard posed upon Jesus to a profound spiritual insight into the heart of Jesus' person.

We are all called from exteriority to interiority.

We are called from a way of relating to the Lord which is just on the surface, external, superficial, to a way of relating to the Lord that goes deeper than the surface of things; we are called to a heart to heart relationship with Jesus, a truly profound relationship with Christ. Like Zacchaeus, we are also called to conversion from haughtiness to humility - symbolised by Zacchaeus' descent from the tree top to his stance on the ground. And, by the same token, we are also called to change from holding ourselves on the periphery of things to entering into the heart of matters. For me, this last conversion is symbolised by the location shift from the outskirts of Jericho (where the Zacchaeus story begins) to the heart of the city in Zacchaeus' house (where Jesus asks to be welcomed and receives hospitality).

I see all of these movements in the story as amounting to a call addressed to us to recover - or maybe even discover for the first time - our true self!

We could say that a central point made by this story is that when we allow ourselves to be regarded by Jesus' eyes of mercy we are recreated, we are made new.

The Zacchaeus we meet at the end of today's gospel story is a completely new man who can now stand his ground before the Lord and others in truth, without fear, just as he is. Zacchaeus no longer has any need to elevate himself. He is comfortable simply to hold himself before the Lord and others in lowliness, acknowledging that he is a sinner pardoned, a man graced by God.

If at the outset of the story Zacchaeus may have thought of himself - as others would have thought of him, given that he was a tax-collector - as being a rich man, someone who had all his needs catered for, by the end of today's story, thanks to his meeting with Jesus, Zacchaeus comes to recognise himself as one who can say with the psalmist *I am poor and needy*.

Mysteriously in Zacchaeus' recognition of his poverty and neediness a richness of life opens up for him.

Aware of his small physical stature before his encounter with Jesus - ready to do things to compensate for it - he comes to the point where he can simply stand before the Lord (and others), unembarrassed by, unashamed of, his littleness.

He no longer feels the need to lift himself up, because the Lord has raised him up!

As a result of all this, Zacchaeus is led to engage himself to live in a just rapport with all those he has dealings with. He is ready to right whatever wrong he may have done.

He now stands in solidarity with those around him and is ready to have compassion upon any who are in need.

All this leads Zacchaeus to enjoy communion with those around him.

The people gathered at table in his house are symbolic of all others with whom he is now ready to share table fellowship, following the example of Jesus whom he hosted in his home.

As a publican, a tax collector, in time past Zacchaeus would have stood apart, cut off from others. Moreover, those around him (especially his own people) would have held him at a distance.

United with Jesus at the end of the story, what we see is that the barriers between Zacchaeus and others have fallen.

Because of his contact with Jesus, because he has welcomed Christ into his life, Zacchaeus has become a man of communion, compassion and concern for others.

Doubtless, those who once held him apart are also led to see him in a new light and welcome him into their lives and find a new way of relating to him.

This is hardly surprising.

Conversion to Christ always brings about communion.

It opens our hearts to live in solidarity and compassion with others: it leads us to experience a quality of relationship with others, hitherto unknown to us.

It makes us as the Book of Wisdom describes God to be: *merciful, loving all, generous to everyone, ever patient in regard to the people around us, always kind to those in need.*

What change we see effected in Zacchaeus!

It is change we can hope for and should long to see effected in our own lives!

May we all be converted to live in ways that reflect the compassionate mercy of God!

May we be led to reflect the mercy and compassion we have received ourselves to those who are in need of the same!

Amen!