

Homily for the 15th Sunday of Luke/Sunday of Zacchaeus

Fr. Filip Lommaert

Sunday, 31 January 2021

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God.

Today, on the 15th Sunday of Luke we read the parable of Zacchaeus the tax collector.

We all know that the season of Great Lent is quickly approaching. The first sign of the approach of Great Lent comes today, six Sundays before Great Lent starts. We are that Sunday, Zacchaeus Sunday.

We also know that our Lord after his baptism by Saint John the Baptist did not stay in Nazareth. He had started spreading the Gospel to all in the land of Israel. So, he went from town to town. On His travels, Our Lord often had to pass Jericho. Jericho was a large, important city that lay on the road between Jerusalem and Galilee, which, as we know, was the home country of our Lord and Saviour.

We all know that Jesus Christ often went to Jerusalem. This meant that He had to pass through the town of Jericho. Today's Gospel reading tells us about one of the occasions He travelled through Jericho.

Whenever He passed through a city, great crowds gathered. Some wanted to hear His Divine words, some just wanted to see Him for a few seconds, and some hoped to witness miracles because wherever our Lord went, He would speak and wherever He went, He would perform miracles.

And so, today in the city of Jericho, people gathered to see, hear and witness our Lord's Divine activity. From the Gospel reading, we can see that practically everybody in the whole city had come out to see our Lord.

Among the people who wanted to see our Lord and Saviour was Zacchaeus. Who was Zacchaeus? He was a rich publican – a tax collector. Actually, he was the chief collector of taxes in Jericho. People were not very keen on tax collectors. And I think I speak for most of us if I say that tax inspectors, as they now are called, are still not very popular.

Fortunately for us, taxes are now being levied in a much fairer way than in the days of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus, was a dishonest man. At least some of the tax that he collected went straight into his own pocket. Tax collectors were not paid wages. They had to take their wages from what they collected, and they were not in the habit of short-changing themselves. We know this from his confession in today's Gospel where he promises to return fourfold that which he had taken dishonestly.

But perhaps even worse than this, Zacchaeus was collecting tax not for a legitimate state, but the occupying power of the Roman Empire. He was therefore not only a fraudster and a thief, but he was also a traitor to his own people.

As he collected tax, he was also collecting sins. In that way we too are like him, we all collect sins, some of us more than others. We, like Zacchaeus, collect sins, and every sin is a theft of God's grace, a fraudulent act, and a betrayal of God.

We also read in today's Gospel that Zacchaeus was a short man, so he climbed a tree in order to see the Lord. "All of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). We, in our spiritual stature, are also short, therefore we must climb the ladder of the virtues. In other words, we must prepare for spiritual effort and growth.

And a little further in today's Gospel reading, we read that Zacchaeus did not call Jesus to himself. On the contrary, Christ Himself looked up to him and said: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today". The God-Man entered Zacchaeus' home – and the life of the chief among the tax collectors was transformed.

Such a transformation takes also place in the life of each person who receives Baptism. The blessing of a home, for instance, is meant to help us recall this singular event (yet one which requires daily reaffirmation in practice) by which our souls were transformed by grace.

We have nothing else recorded of the conversation between Zaccheus and our Lord. We can only guess how the Saviour must have spoken to him. With tenderness and kindness and how He must have embraced Zaccheus as a Father would embrace a long lost son.

We do see the repentance of Zaccheus and we know that he became a disciple of our Saviour. We rejoice that he found his salvation and that he was liberated from this great sin which had been accumulating all those years. We see from this Gospel that there is no person, no matter how great his sin, who cannot find salvation. God, being our Creator and our Father, loves us to such an extent that there is absolutely nothing we can do that would stop God not to love us!

Our actions make God sorrowful and they hurt Him. He longs for and waits for the day when we, his children, will come to our senses and realise what we have done and turn to him. God is with us at all times. He is present everywhere, knocking constantly on the door of our hearts, waiting for us to open our hearts. But as mighty as God is, even as the Creator of this world and the whole universe, He cannot force us to love Him. Love can not be forced.

No matter what God does to us, we cannot be forced to love Him. He gave us this freedom. He gave us this divine ability to love and it is we who must take that final step. We must turn around and face Christ and not keep our backs to Him.

Christ is right next to us, but what do we do? We turn our backs on Him and we look in the other direction. Instead of gazing upon the beautiful face of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are too busy looking at other things. Instead of hearing the soft and beautiful words of our Lord calling to us, we are too busy listening to the noise and the torment and the turmoil of this world. Instead of following Christ on the road set out for us in the Gospels, we are too busy running in all directions like maniacs, following different paths and different roads.

To face our Lord and Saviour, we only have to turn around and we will see that He truly is in front of us. That is what Zaccheus did. He turned around. He turned his whole life around. One turn and he saw Christ and from that moment on, he found eternal salvation. In verse 9, Jesus says to Zacchaeus: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham." Here the title "son of Abraham" indicates that Zacchaeus has become like this patriarch of Israel. He was counted righteous by his faith, he became generous toward the poor, and he was united to the people of God. Early records tell us he went on to become a bishop of the Church.

May we all find the salvation that Zaccheus found. May we all be able one day to turn around to find our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And from that moment on, follow Him into life eternal. This Gospel tells us how Christ brought salvation to the sinful man, and how his life was changed simply because he "sought to see who Jesus was" (Luke 19:3).

The desire and effort to see Jesus begins the entire movement through Lent towards Pascha. It is the first movement of salvation. Our Lenten journey begins with a recognition of our own sinfulness, just as Zacchaeus recognised his own. He promised to make restitution by giving half of his wealth to the poor, and by paying to those he had falsely accused four times as much as they had lost. In this, he went beyond the requirements of the Law (Ex. 22:3-12).

The example of Zacchaeus teaches us that we should turn away from our sins, and atone for them. The real proof of our sorrow and repentance is not just a verbal apology, it is to correct ourselves and try to make amends for the consequences of our evil actions. We are also assured of God's mercy and compassion by Christ's words to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation is come to this house" (Luke 19:9).

After the Great Doxology at Sunday Matins (when the Tone of the week is Tone 1, 3, 5, 7) we sing the Dismissal Hymn of the Resurrection "Today salvation has come to the world," which echoes the Lord's words to Zacchaeus.

Amen!