

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time C - Christ's Mission and also Church Mission, Seeking and Saving What Was Lost

October 30, 2022.

The story of the rich tax collector, converted when Jesus visited him, is found in Luke's gospel alone. He makes it part of the Saviour's instructions on his way to Jerusalem – together with stories about the teaching of Jesus on faith and prayer, about his receiving of outcasts, and his advice concerning worldly possessions. In a sense, all these themes are brought together in this incident so well described in this Sunday's Gospel reading (19:1-10).

Zaccheus may have been small in stature, but he was a man of substance – a centre of attention. As a senior tax collector, who presided over the collection of tolls and taxes in Jericho, an important centre at the juncture of two trade routes, Zaccheus would have been a man of considerable wealth. The attention he attracted by his undignified ascent into the branches of a tree to see Jesus would have provoked amusement. But the incident gives us an insight into the forthright character of Zaccheus – qualities that contributed, no doubt, to his worldly success. **The attitude he displays in his encounter with Jesus also makes it clear that, for all his success, he is looking for more from life than the wealth he has accumulated.** When Jesus calls him down from the tree to visit his house, he was overwhelmed, *he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully*.

Brothers and sisters, Zaccheus is like so many people today who, though they are confused, are not far in their generous outlook from the kingdom of God. Those, on the other hand, who 'complain' that the Saviour has *gone to stay at a sinner's house*, are like the righteous who do not understand the generous mercy of God, and do not know how to reach out to those in need. With Jesus at his side, the forthright little tax official confounds his critics; he 'stands his ground', Luke tells us, and amazes the whole town by the generosity of the conversion to which he has been led by the words of Jesus. He is prepared to renounce his wealthy status, by giving half of his riches to the poor, and by repaying fourfold what he has gained unjustly. **Today, Jesus said, salvation has come to this house**. There are moments of grace in our lives, moments we shall never regret, if we respond trustingly and generously to the call of God. In his concern for the outcasts – stressed in the readings we have had from Luke's gospel in recent weeks - Jesus was giving expression to the true faith of old Israel, forgotten by so many of his contemporaries, and calling them back to that faith: clearly expressed in the first reading from Wisdom (11:22 – 12:2). God loves all those God has brought into existence; if God 'corrects' and 'admonishes' it is that, **as a 'lover of life', the Lord may 'spare all'**

The power of **Christ's grace** opened Zacchaeus' eyes to his real faults and awakened his religious impulses. The Son of man came to seek out and save the lost like Zacchaeus, a greedy and selfish man. Jesus helps him recognize his sin by showing him pure love. This love is waiting to change our lives as soon as we show a willingness to open the door of our hearts and let his salvation get to work in the very centre of our being. We welcome him into our lives whenever we pray, whenever we come to Mass, and especially when we receive him in Holy Communion. But salvation had not yet come to Zacchaeus's household until **only after Zacchaeus promised to spread his wealth to those around him instead of hoarding it for himself, to turn his selfishness into self-giving, to let God's goodness towards him affect his actions towards others, only then did Jesus say, "Today salvation has come to this house."** This week, let's spread whatever wealth we have received in life - our time, talents, and treasure - to those around us; let's combat our selfish tendencies by turning them into self-giving actions with love.

Christ's encounter with Zacchaeus is a parable in action. It illustrates the whole meaning of Christ's incarnation: **"The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."** Christ's whole life on earth was dedicated to bringing people back into friendship with God, and to establishing his Church to continue that mission throughout history. It seems so obvious. But we forget about it so easily! This is the Good News of Jesus Christ: that in him we can once again live in friendship with

God, our sins can be forgiven, we can become what we were created to be: children of God, members of God's family. Original sin had shattered the relationship between the human family and God. Mankind rebelled against God by disobeying the law that he had built into our human nature. We had tried to achieve happiness by our own power, without God. But that is impossible. We were created to live in communion with God. Our happiness, on earth and in heaven, depends on living in friendship with God. Christ came to reconcile that broken relationship. That was his mission. And whenever people trusted him enough to let him accomplish this mission in their lives, as Zacchaeus did, they experienced deep and lasting peace. **Jesus wants to do that for all of us: to bring us back into right relationship with God, to give us the courage to live as we ought to live, so that we can experience the satisfaction we were meant to experience.**

We have just celebrated Mission Sunday last week. It is not a one shot deal. If **"seeking and saving what was lost" was Christ's mission, then it is also the Church's mission.** We, the baptized, are the Church and so it is our mission. If we want to grow and persevere in our friendship with Christ, we simply can't let ourselves forget about it even amidst the difficulties, sufferings, and preoccupations of life. We are all surrounded by people like Zacchaeus, people convinced that happiness can be found in money, pleasure, power or prestige. But deep down in their hearts, they know instinctively that it's not true, and they are climbing all kinds of trees - New Age trees, idolatry trees, self-indulgence trees - trying to catch a glimpse of the true Saviour. By courageously being Christ's messengers in words and deeds, we can bring them the satisfaction of finding, as Zacchaeus did, forgiveness, redemption and purpose. We can bring peace to troubled souls - not a peace that comes from us, since we are still imperfect, but the peace that comes from Christ, our King. And when we do that, we will also bring peace to troubled societies. This mission may seem too big for us. But we don't have to do it alone, God is with us always.

Tomorrow is Halloween day. From nearly the beginning of Christianity, it has been a customary practice to solemnize the anniversary of a martyr's death. This was normally done at the church nearest the place where the martyrdom occurred. By the fourth century, neighbouring churches had begun to celebrate common feasts. According to the Original Catholic Encyclopedia, "Pope Gregory III (731-741) consecrated a chapel in the Basilica of St. Peter to all the saints and fixed the anniversary for 1 November." Although this date had become significant for the Christians in the West, it was not yet a universally recognized feast. Sixty years later, Pope Gregory IV commanded that All Saints be observed everywhere annually on the first day of November. Evening vigils on the day before a feast or solemnity are customary in the Catholic Faith, and so Halloween falls on October 31 because it is the vigil before All Saints 'Day, and not because the Church wanted to "baptize" any other pagan celebration like the Samhain as believed long time ago. Many Catholic schools and parishes use to open the school halls and parish hall on Halloween night and invite the children and their parents to come dressed as their favourite saints. Treats are distributed. As Catholics, the most important thing we need to remember is that Halloween is the vigil before a very important feast day, where we honour the saints in heaven, who dedicated their lives (and in many cases gave them up) to advance the cause of Christ and his Church. The Eve of the feast of All Hallowed (Holy) Souls also introduced a month of special prayers for the dead. The liturgy of these days is all about the transition from the state of earthly life and of Purgatory to the beatific vision of the blessed in heaven—the journey of the soul from one state to another. In the meantime, there remain things for us to do: taking the celebration of All Saints and All Souls as seriously as possible, and resisting the suggestion that there is no need to pray for the dead. They are helpless: they cannot do good works to mitigate their sins. In recognition of this fact, the official Handbook of Indulgences offers us indulgences applicable to the dead every day for the first eight days of November if we pray in a cemetery—plenary on the usual conditions. Let us not neglect this opportunity to help our loved ones, and also the forgotten dead who have no one to pray for them.