

31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time- Year C

October 30, 2016

Readings: Wisdom 11:22-12:2; 2 Thess 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10

You may recall that last Sunday's gospel recounted the parable about a proud Pharisee and a humble tax-collector who both went up to the Temple to pray. (Lk 18:9-14) Today's gospel is not a parable but an actual account of a real experience which Jesus had with a tax-collector who had a name. His name was Zacchaeus. He was not just any tax-collector. We are told that he was the chief tax-collector in Jericho, and as a result a most hated man.

I have often wondered why Zacchaeus was never counted in the list of saints, as so many other prominent figures in Scripture. Thus, I was surprised to find out that in the Eastern Church, he in fact is revered as a saint. Tradition recounts that after having accompanied St. Peter on his missionary travels, Zacchaeus became the Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine where he died in peace. The Eastern Church has declared him a saint, and celebrates his feast-day on April 20. And Eastern iconography lovingly portrays him up in the tree, with Jesus below gesturing to him to come down to dine with him.

If you dig back into your memory, I suspect most of us would be able to think of a tree that we liked to climb in our neighborhood, perhaps even in our own backyard. I watched as a tree grew rather quickly in my own backyard, and marvel to see its size today, as my parents have now lived at that address for fifty years. But I will make a confession- I was a little frightened of climbing.

I did not always trust myself, and getting back down always seemed much more difficult than going up. I imagine it was a combo plate of a slight fear of heights mixed in with, "I wonder if we have permission to do this," that coalesced to the point where I did much more watching than climbing.

Another paradox about Zacchaeus is that he was seen by the Jews as a betrayer of his own people and therefore a sinner (v.7). It is noted that he is rich (v.2), yet we learn that he gives half of his goods to the poor (v.8). Can you imagine giving half of your paycheck to the poor? And yes, because of it, some were upset with Jesus that he dined with the likes of him.

Above all, if he is revered as a saint, it is because of his persistence, even in the face of opposition. He was curious to be sure. But his curiosity led him to go to lengths to overcome his own natural obstacles in order to seek out Jesus.

But there is another catch. His act of climbing a tree was frowned upon in Middle Eastern culture. There is the story of John Badeau, United States Ambassador to Cairo under President John F. Kennedy, who had climbed a tree in the backyard of the embassy in order to fix some lights for a party he was hosting at the embassy. News traveled and during an audience, Egyptian President Nasser inquired if the rumor were true. In the Middle East, powerful men do not climb trees, apparently even in the privacy of their own walled garden.<sup>1</sup>

Zacchaeus cared much more about seeing Jesus than he cared about his reputation. Perhaps he felt he had nothing lose on that count. This entire Year of Mercy has been about Christ seeking out the sinner, and about us as ones who approach the Good Shepherd, seeking healing. It is both about receiving mercy, but equally about showing it to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Bailey, "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels," InterVarsity Press, 2009, page 178

As Pope Francis wrote in the primary document launching the Holy Year:

Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI also spoke about the face of mercy; it is not a new concept with the Year of Mercy, even if it is more obviously accented. In a homily inaugurating Advent several years ago, the Holy Father remarked:

God knows the human heart. He knows that those who reject him have not recognized his true Face, and so he never ceases to knock at our door like a humble pilgrim in search of hospitality...<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, like Zacchaeus, let us seek the Lord, even if it brings us to the peripheries! Let us appreciate that he too is looking for us, giving us the same invitation to come down and be with him.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, para. #1.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for First Vespers of Advent 1 December 2007, St. Peter's Basilica