

## **Thirty First Sunday of the year October 30, 2016**

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

Today's readings lead us to meditate on a concise expression of the delicate coordination of both divine initiative and human effort in the work of our salvation. They tell us how great and magnificent God is and how small we are before him. But God loves all his creation and out of love he created it. Man is given the power to know God and search for him and shelter under his glory. The Gospel of today tells us that the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost. Here we have the story of Zacchaeus the leader of the tax collectors. The person who is curious to see Jesus and encounter him finds himself receiving the master in his own house over a meal. The encounter of the divine and human in this context leads Zacchaeus to his total conversion and reconciliation. The first reading from the Book of Wisdom is the reflection of one of the greatest paradoxes we have. On the one hand we have the transcendence of God, the mighty and all powerful and on the other is the creation of God to whom he shows his personal and individual attention. God's mercy is the prolongation of his creative power and his mastery over his own might. He loves his creation and because of this love God pardons and is patient with people so that they might repent. The second reading tells the community to place its trust in the Lord and rely on his benevolence. Paul wants them to endure their circumstances patiently, but to master them and use them to strengthen their Christian lives.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Wisdom speaks of the mercy of God for all the things that He has created. Even though the whole of the universe is like a grain of dust compared with the creation, yet he loves all the things he has created. It is he who preserves all creation and in His infinite mercy towards all, the Lord God overlooks the sins of the people so that all may repent because his spirit is in every creature. In wisdom, He has made them all. The earth is full of His creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. He is a God who is interested and benevolent to every creature because he is all powerful. His mercy is infinite without any boundary. He loves all that he has created and there is goodness in all his creatures he created. He exists in them and he sustains them all. Not only does God sustain life for the sake of sustaining life. As a caring Father who disciplines those He loves, He corrects little by little those who trespass, reminding and warning them of the things through which they sin, so that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in the Lord. The breath of life put into created things is the gift of God. It

is in a way part of his own imperishable life. It is out of his infinite power that he is able to create all that is. Yet even the vast universe is considered insignificant before the eyes of God. For God's faithful people true wisdom is found in serving God.

Today's Second Reading from the Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians echoes that the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ should be glorified in us and us in Him. United in prayer, the Christian community prays asking God to make us worthy of His call so that we may fulfil by His power every intention to perform goodness and work of faith. Here St. Paul was pointing out that the call from paganism to Christianity was also a call to glory. The growth of the Body of Christ magnified the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. While pressing on, we must "rely on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." During the time when Paul was preaching some of the Thessalonians believers were also deceived into believing that the day of the Lord had arrived. Having encouraged the Thessalonians to persevere in their faith, and thus give glory to God, Paul tells them not to consider that the end of the world and the second coming of Christ are close at hand. He warns them not to be deceived in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed namely, the one destined for destruction. It is by walking in sound doctrines, by permitting the Spirit of Christ to guide and teach us in all truth, that the Name of the Lord Jesus is glorified in every individual. Paul tells them not to be deceived by false teachers lest they become disturbed in spirit. In the Gospel we have another example of Jesus' interests in the conversion of sinners. During the time of Jesus Jericho was a beautiful town and important trade centre. It was a last stop for Pilgrims from the East before they started their final steep climb to Jerusalem. It was a rich and prosperous town and a trade Centre and therefore customs had to be paid on many items that passed through. This required the presence of a high tax official with many working under his direction. Zacchaeus the chief of the tax collectors is introduced into the story because he wanted to see Jesus and find for himself who this person was. Tax collectors had never been popular in Roman Palestine and they were particularly hated by everyone including the Jews themselves. It was bad enough that the tax collectors collaborated with the foreign oppressors, namely the Romans. They also oppressed people by collecting taxes more than demanded by Rome. In the Gospel of today Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus was not by chance. Jesus called him in a unique way. Zacchaeus had heard that Jesus was coming and out of curiosity, he wanted to see Him. We are also told that he was short in stature and, because of the crowd blocking his vision, he could not see Jesus. So, in spite of being a rich and

important man, he did not hesitate to climb a tree to get a better look. He risked public ridicule because no adult ever ran in public and certainly no respectable person would ever climb a tree in public. He would not have been very welcome among the crowds anyway. He was not a person people would have liked to be mingling with and have him around them. He knew that many citizens would take this as the opportunity to give him a kick, a push or a shove at him and he would probably wind up black and blue with bruises. In his determination to see Jesus he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree. He had no trouble climbing because the sycamore tree has a short trunk and wide sideways branches that made it easy to climb.

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus, he stopped there, asked him to come down the tree and invited Himself to his home for a meal. There is no recorded instance of Jesus ever refusing an invitation to share food and drink but surprisingly invited himself into this man's house who was a tax collector. Here Jesus saw a person's heart, his search for repentance and his hope for the future. Jesus looked at Zacchaeus and Zacchaeus looked at Jesus. Like all true seekers Zacchaeus got more than he bargained for. So the surprised Tax Collector hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus into his home. Most likely he had heard many great things about Jesus and now he is given the opportunity to receive him as his guest. This certainly displeased the crowd that was accompanying Jesus. In their eyes this tax collector like all tax collectors was a sinner and they grumbled about it. What followed was a total human change of heart. Sharing the food and drink is one of the easiest means of conversion and reconciliation. Zacchaeus made an announcement to Jesus and volunteered to distribute half of his possessions to the poor and added that if he had defrauded anyone of anything he would pay back four times the amount which in reality was the restitution made by a robber. He was showing himself to be a man of feeling deeply touched by the kindness of Jesus. He responded to a moment of truth, the moment he knew that God's love was greater than the whole world and he had to let go his own attachments. The rich man was becoming merciful and he was getting through the eye of the needle. Indeed salvation had come to his house not only to the person of the tax collector but his entire family.

We have to remember that the main character of the story is not Zacchaeus but Jesus. Here we see the son of man in action, doing what he came to do. Those who sincerely desire a sight of Christ, like Zacchaeus, will break through opposition, and take pains to see him. Here we see Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house. Wherever Christ comes to any place or confronts any person he opens his own

heart, and inclines it in such a way to receive the other. He that has a mind to know Jesus shall be known of him. Those, whom Christ calls, have to humble themselves like this tax collector and come down the tree of pride. Zacchaeus gave proofs publicly that he was become a true convert. He did not look to be justified by his works as the Pharisee; but by his good works he through the grace of God, showed the sincerity of his faith and repentance. Zacchaeus declared himself to be a happy man, now that he has turned from sin to God. He shows to all that he is saved from his sins, from the guilt of them, from the power of them and thus all the benefits of salvation are his. Jesus has come to his house, and where Christ comes he brings salvation with him. He came into this lost world to seek and to save it. His design was to save, when there was no salvation in any other. He seeks those that sought him not, and asked not for him.

In this gospel passage we perceive that Zacchaeus, after having met Jesus experienced a total detachment from his earthly possessions. This indeed is the reaction of meeting Jesus and experiencing him in the Gospel. Once a person encounters Jesus he cannot remain the same. We see it in the context of Peter and his companions, Matthew, Paul and several others. The person is expected to change. This was the experience of Zaccheus. Regarding restitution, the Law of Moses taught, "When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the Lord, that person incurs guilt and shall confess the sin that has been committed. The person shall make full restitution for the wrong adding one fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged." But Zacchaeus shows his extra ordinary generosity. Instead of giving one fifth over the goods unlawfully taken he adds three times over to the person concerned. This was shocking to the people in two ways. First is the generosity of the man to respond to Jesus and do the restitution more than required by law. Second is the attitude of Jesus because he goes to the house of a sinner. The tax collectors were considered ritually unclean and had to be avoided by the public in all situations.

Following this personal commitment, Jesus responds to him by declaring that "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." Jesus did not say that salvation had come to him alone, but rather to his entire household. It is because the household shared in Zacchaeus' blessing as they had previously suffered in his unjust practices. Jesus adds to this saying that the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. Zacchaeus was one such example where God welcomes back a sinner. Here we see the son of man in action, doing what he came to do: saving what was lost. Hence the story here is one of hope teaching us that it is never too late to change. Salvation happens not when we see

Jesus but actually when Jesus sees us. Like Zacchaeus we are all sinners to a greater or lesser degree. Jesus always makes it a point to approach us and let him see us what he is like. He is for us someone who is concerned, who cares for us and above all a God of infinite love. But he sees us as we are and we must be open to him all the time.

There is a message for us from the gospel passage of today. Very often we are not able to see Jesus in our lives because we are crowded out by other people and the way they think. To see Jesus clearly we often have to get away from the crowd and risk being different, risk losing our dignity. The word "holy" in Greek actually means someone who is different, someone set apart. We can imagine Zacchaeus' surprise when Jesus looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." He would have been shocked to hear such warm words from the Master. He looked for Jesus and now Jesus was ready to build a personal relationship with him. In the Book of Revelation we have the beautiful words of Jesus: "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his house and eat with him and he will eat with me". He expects the doors of our heart always to remain open and ready to offer him hospitality. In fact Zacchaeus showed no hesitation. He climbed down quickly, delighted to welcome Jesus into his house. He never bothered about the crowd and he was aware their reactions would be bad. But for him it was the discovery of a new treasure. The entire story is one of hope, teaching us that it is never late for us to change. Salvation happens not when we see Jesus but when Jesus actually sees us. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us pray for those who do not have the indwelling of the Lord God in their homes. Let us ask the Lord to reach out to these souls so that they too may partake in the universal salvation plan of God.

A nurse on the paediatric ward, before listening to the little ones' chests, would plug the stethoscope into their ears and let them listen to their own heart. Their eyes would always light up with awe, but she never got a response equal to four-year old David's comment. Gently she tucked the stethoscope into his ears and placed the disk over his heart. 'Listen', she said...'What do you suppose that is?' He drew his eyebrows together in a puzzled line and looked up as if lost in the mystery of the strange tap - tap - tapping deep in his chest. Then his face broke out in a wondrous grin and he asked, 'is that Jesus knocking?'

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