

31<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C  
THE ZACCHAEUS' COURAGE AND CHALLENGE

*"Look, Sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times the amount" (Lk. 19: 8)*

***In a Nutshell:*** The Readings of today are as encouraging as they are challenging. They reveal that no one is insignificant in God's sight, not even a sinner. In Him, everyone has a place because He created us in love; and because of His love for us, He is merciful. In the First Reading (Wisdom 11: 22-12:2), the divine author writes: "You love all that exists, you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence, for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it." In the Second Reading (2 Thess. 1: 11-2:2), St. Paul encourages the Thessalonian Christians to pray to God, with the hope that He will make them worthy of His call and fulfil their desires for goodness. Prayer is a sign of our response to God's love; God's answer is the demonstration of the outpouring of His grace upon us. In the Gospel (Lk. 19: 1-10), we read the fascinating story of Zacchaeus, where St. Luke narrates this peculiar story that highlights the loving mercy of God for all, who turn to Him with their heart.

***The Man Zacchaeus:*** In Jesus' time tax collectors were not popular people. Zacchaeus being a chief tax collector received more rebuffs from his people. He was seen as an accomplice with an oppressive foreign government, who extorted his people to benefit his ruthless masters and to enrich himself also. The system allowed the tax collector to charge more than required so that they could benefit from the surplus. This was an incentive for them to be even aggressive in the pursuits. Thus, Zacchaeus was looked upon in the Jewish society as a collaborator with an oppressive government, a political traitor, a social misfit, and a public sinner. However, he was not deterred by this public condemnation. Therefore, when he heard that Jesus was passing by, he was "anxious to see the kind of man Jesus was." He was drawn to Jesus by the drive of curiosity, not so to be converted. But he was a man of brief stature, a short man. This deprived him of any chance to satisfy his curiosity. Could his height be a symbolic presentation of what sin does to us? Making us short spiritually and therefore not able to reach or access the higher gifts of the Spirit? Aware of his limitation and motivated by the desire to "see the kind of man Jesus was", he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree. There are some interesting elements here. First, he was looked down upon by others but that did not stop him from going out there to satisfy his needs; he knew that his stature was a

serious limitation, he sought out an immediate solution, which could have been as humiliating then as it would be now – to have a wealthy man run and climb on to a tree. From Zacchaeus, we love to reflect thus: do we allow what people think or say about us to affect us? Do we positively accept our limitations and creatively work to overcome them? What do we think, would you climb the tree to see Jesus? Remember, the tree is a metaphor for the sacrifices we must make to encounter Jesus; the running and climbing of the tree are acts of self-emptying which we must undertake if we need Jesus to fill us with His merciful love. Are we ready for these?

***The Life Changing Encounter:*** When Jesus reached the spot, He did the most unexpected. He stopped, looked up and spoke to Zacchaeus. “Zacchaeus”, He said, “come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today.” Those must have been the most unbelievable words Zacchaeus had ever heard. Those words were carried by the wind into an infinite timelessness, as they still echo in our ears and hearts today. The Lord continues to invite us to “come down” from the heights of our pride, selfishness, wealth, power, and influence. With bewilderment, Zacchaeus hurried down and “welcome the Lord joyfully.” At this point, since the Lord had stated His intention, Zacchaeus was ready to pay any prize for this to happen. Can we stand our grounds like Zacchaeus in the face of opposition?

***The Restitution:*** While others complained against the decision of Jesus, a Jewish Rabbi having a meal in a tax collector’s house, Zacchaeus stood his ground. “Look, Sir,” he said, “I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times the amount.” He did not only accept the fact that he had wrongly enriched himself, but he freely offered to share those riches with the poor and to make restitution for his wrong deeds. As a Jew, he knew what the Law of Moses required: a full measure and one-fifth was required of him (Lev. 6: 5; Num. 5: 7). By paying four times over, he went far beyond what the law stipulated. The Catechism of the Catholic Church prescribes reparation even for sins absolved: “Every offense committed against justice and truth entails the *duty of reparation*, even if its author has been forgiven. When it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly” (CCC. 2487; see also 1459).

***Salvation Has Come:*** The actions and efforts of Zacchaeus were courageous and noble. The Lord saw his heart and rewarded him: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has

come to seek out and save what was lost.” This is the purpose of Jesus’ action; the reason he came; the reason He died for us; the reason he continues to sit at the right hand of the Father and intercede for us. As the First reading said, each one of us is precious to God because He created us in love. The self-righteous Pharisees could not have this privilege because of their hypocrisy and judgemental attitude, but the public sinner, who was humble and open to Jesus did. We too have a choice to make.

***Dear friends,*** the story of Zacchaeus is a beautiful story of our journey in faith. It challenges us to self-awareness, desire for the Lord, openness of heart and willingness to make reparation for our past sins. Each of us is invited to walk this path. For the Lord does not look at us as sinners to be condemned but as sinful children to be saved. Zacchaeus did not only open the door of his house to welcome Jesus, but most importantly, he opened the door of his heart so the Lord could enter and sup with him (Rev. 3: 20).