

THIRTY FIRST SUNDAY OF ORD TIME

ZACCHAEUS (LK 19:1-10)

Luke has given us a description of the Jerusalem journey of Jesus and some of the encounters along the way. Today's episode is one of the most extraordinary. Jericho is the last town Jesus will pass through on this journey. The old city, destroyed when Joshua took the Holy Land, was a ruin in the days of Jesus. The oasis that Jericho constituted was then known as the city of Palms (Judges 1;16 etc.). Depending on the season it had a wonderful climate- seven hundred and seventy feet below sea level, idyllic in winter and awful in summer (Josephus, *Bell.Jud.* IV 8,3). In a world surrounded by desert it had plenty of fresh water, and there were fruit trees everywhere. It was an ideal place for beggars, well aware of pilgrims and tourists. And Jesus cured one or two blind men there. Herod the Great had built a splendid palace there. There is a gruesome account in Josephus of his final days there as he died the way he lived, causing enormous suffering.

Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus lived here. Because of his background people would probably have found his name 'amusing': it meant in Hebrew 'clean' or 'innocent'. In the light of his 'profession' nobody could have been less righteous than Zacchaeus. Publicans were notorious, as are bailiffs and tax collectors everywhere. In Palestine in those days they basically worked for the occupying power, the Romans. They had to bid for the right to get the job, honour the amount they had to hand over from taxes collected, and enjoy the rest of the pickings for themselves. They could have been extortionate and violent, with impunity. (Zacchaeus was head of the publicans there, the only Greek word in all Greek literature for 'head toll-collector'- *architelones*)!. To have clean hands in that context was almost unthinkable.

That Zacchaeus was small of stature meant that the milling crowd around Jesus precluded him from seeing the famous man. The leafy tree (a sycamore- fig-mulberry tree) had huge leaves and was easy to climb. Strangely Jesus knew he was up there and knew his name. And Jesus took the initiative. Zacchaeus was only curious, and had asked for nothing. But with the personal address of Jesus he displays his good will and his intention to live in future according to the law, making the necessary reparations for any fraudulent practice conducted by himself or condoned by him. Contributing the half of his property to the poor and the fourfold promise of restitution shows his good will- such details were legally part and parcel of penance necessitated then when reparations took place. Zacchaeus was of course a Jew!

The crowd must have been horrified at the overture of Jesus. Seemingly he had invited himself to dine with this corrupt man. So the accusation against him was true: he eats with publicans and sinners! Such activity was outrageous. It looked as though Jesus was condoning what everyone else found abhorrent. Contemporary Jewish literature provides many examples of how association with these people was ruinous for the People of God and their mission to honour and propagate the Law of God. Jesus would have been guilty by association and implication. Table fellowship was the most powerful indicator of identity and reciprocity.

Explanations

Jesus had asked Zacchaeus to climb down quickly from the tree: 'salvation has come to your house this day'. This invitation the rich man accepts with joy. The crowd is unhappy. But the converted sinner makes his bold and public statement of intent, without being asked

to do so. That was what Jesus must have expected, and declared that salvation had come to this household today because the penitent is a son of Abraham, like any other good Jew. And there follows the statement: 'The Son of Man has come to seek out and save those who are lost' (v.10).

The Good Shepherd

Of course in the background all the time is the motif of the Good Shepherd going after those who are lost (Cf. Ezek 34:4ff.). The theme is echoed in today's first reading from the *Book of Wisdom*: "You are merciful to all...you overlook men's sins so that they can repent. You love all that exists...lover of life" etc. (Wis 11:22-12:2). The Pharisees and the Sectarrians of Qumran wanted to save people by avoiding them. Jesus took the exact opposite approach. Mercy and forgiveness are foundational to his mission. He presented himself as a lovely personality who was most approachable. He loved people into goodness. We recall his exchange with Peter: do you love me? Feed my lambs, feed my sheep (Jn 21:17ff.) He did not say just 'feed the poor'. Rich and poor belonged to him. The conversion of Zacchaeus must have seemed more astonishing to the people that day in Jericho than the cure of the blind beggars- if they knew about it!. Zacchaeus did not end up poor. He now had a proper attitude towards wealth. He ended up loving the poor and providing for them (v.8).

Conclusion

The present pope (Francis) has an extraordinary sensitivity for the need of mercy and forgiveness. He is being accused of not honouring the traditional faith of the Church because of his welcoming approach. There is no doubt that he eschews the trappings of riches and power. He took the name of the patron of the poor. But many are poor because of the sorrows of their life. The pope seems to be trying to encourage everyone to feel sympathy for the folk who might just feel that they are beyond help. We all are too well acquainted with our own family problems and personal difficulties to feel superior to anyone. Most reasonable people will wish for some moral standards. That is the fascinating aspect of Zacchaeus. He always knew the standards but now he honours them in practice- the little man is presented by St.Luke as an excellent example of what it is like finally to get things right and be at peace. A happy Sunday to you all. Amen.

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