

The Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 11:22-12:2
<i>Response</i>	I will extol thee, my God and King, and bless thy name for ever and ever.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13, 14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 19:1-10

The 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C gives us another famous story that's only found in the Gospel of Luke. It's the story of Zaccheus and the Sycamore Tree. So unlike several other passages we've been looking at in previous videos, which are parables of Jesus, this is a narrative. It's an account of an encounter between Jesus and this chief tax collector from the city of Jericho—very famous encounter. So let's look at Luke 19:1-10, and we'll try to unpack the famous story:

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him,

“Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.”¹

Okay, great, fantastic story. Wonderful, wonderful story. Alright, so let’s just walk through a few points. Number one: notice where this encounter takes place. It takes place near the city of Jericho, which was a border town in Judea, and being on the border, was probably also a toll center. In other words, it would have been a place where taxes would be collected on people coming into the country or bringing in goods and products from other lands. So Zacchaeus appears to be not just any tax collector, but the chief tax collector. So if you think about it in terms of levels, you’ve got—in the IRS—you’ve got minor agents, but then you have the executives, you have people who are at the top of the chain. That’s who Zacchaeus is, and Luke tells us that not only was he a chief tax collector, he’s also rich. So in terms of the Gospel of Luke, these are two strikes against him. Because we’ve seen rich people before who don’t tend to do very well, like the parable of the rich fool. And we’ve also seen tax collectors throughout the Gospel, and we know how they are regarded by the common people in a first century Jewish context. They’re regarded as public sinners, as basically people who are engaged in legalized theft. They make their livelihood breaking the commandment “you shall not steal.” That’s how a tax collector is seen.

And so this particular tax collector in Jericho, his name is Zacchaeus. Now Zacchaeus is a Greek name, *Zakchaios*. It’s from the Hebrew *Zakkai*, which ironically, *Zakkai* in Hebrew means clean or innocent. So Zacchaeus the tax collector, his name means innocent—which, if you know anything about first century tax collectors, you know he’s anything but innocent. One of the reasons Luke may tell us this story is because there’s an irony embedded in the very name of Zacchaeus—the innocent one who is the chief tax collector in Jericho. The word innocent, too, *Zakkai*, also is synonymous with righteous or upright, *tzaddiq* in Hebrew. So there’s a real irony here to the fact of Zacchaeus, the righteous or the innocent one, being the chief tax collector.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So Jesus is coming into the town of Jericho, and He is—by this point in the Gospel, we're in chapter 19—He's famous. He's well-known. Some people regard Him as the Messiah or as a prophet sent by God. And so He garners a crowd as He's entering into the city. And Zacchaeus has a problem, and you know this if you're short. If you end up in a big crowd of people, and you happen to be, you know, challenged in terms of height, you can't see anything. So Zacchaeus here is resourceful, though. He climbs up into a sycamore tree so that he can see Jesus as Jesus is passing along the way, because he was “small of stature” (Luke 19:3).

Now I've heard—just pause here for a second—I've heard all kinds of explanations of what that would have meant in a first century Jewish context for him to climb up into the tree. “It would have been shameful.” I haven't been able to substantiate those claims by any actual primary sources saying anything like that. However, I think just human nature being what it was, you can imagine that it would be unusual (at the very least) for a person of some eminence—a person of dignity, a dignitary, a person of wealth and prestige, such as the chief tax collector—to go climbing up into a tree like he's one of the town's children. So I think there is something at least revealing about Zacchaeus' zeal to see Jesus, and also, a kind of (at least) transient humility on his part. He's going to do whatever it takes just to catch a glimpse of Jesus as Jesus comes into town. So as Jesus looks up and sees him, He says, “Zacchaeus, make haste, come down. I'm staying at your house today.”

So we've talked about hospitality before in the ancient world in different passages in the Gospels, like when Jesus has the parables of the banquet, (you know) showing hospitality to your neighbors, showing hospitality to the poor. Well, eating with someone was one of the principle expressions of hospitality. And in this case, of course, Jesus invites Himself, which is a little unusual. Usually you would make the invitation. But in this case, Jesus invites Himself to Zacchaeus' home, and Zacchaeus takes Him in. Now, eating with someone in antiquity (as today) was a sign of communion. Not in the sense of Eucharistic communion, but in the sense of a relationship. It manifests, it makes public, it makes visible a relationship—a communion, a fellowship between two people. As a rule, if we hate someone or if we're at enmity with someone, we don't sit down to eat with them, right? And also, as a rule—in antiquity as today—the people we tend to eat with most are our

family. So to bring someone into your home and to eat with them is a kind of symbolic...it establishes a kind of symbolic familial tie. It's an expression of communion.

So when Jesus invites Himself into Zacchaeus' home to dine with him, He's expressing a desire to be in communion with Zacchaeus and to be as if He were one of Zacchaeus' family. Now that's shocking in this original context, precisely because tax collectors were seen as public sinners. They are known to be violating the Decalogue, breaking the commandment against theft, commiserating with and colluding with pagans, who by definition are in a perpetual state of ritual defilement. And you can imagine a situation in which a tax collector who might not be welcome, for example, in the temple in Jerusalem—although we just read a parable where one of them had access to the temple, but they're not the kind of person you would expect to have fellowship either with God or fellowship with their neighbor. And yet, Jesus expresses a desire for fellowship with him. And that's what they say: "They all murmured, 'He's gone in to be the guest of a sinner.'"

Why would He do such a thing? Is Jesus, by means of that action, condoning Zacchaeus' theft? Is he condoning Zacchaeus' sins as a tax collector? Is he condoning collusion with the pagan government who's taken over the land that was given by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? What's going on here? Well, the power of Jesus' person is so great that without any further discussion, apparently, as soon as He expresses the desire to be in communion with Zacchaeus, to be a guest in his home, somehow this moves Zacchaeus to repentance. So notice how Zacchaeus expresses this repentance. First, he says:

"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor."

Now pause there for a second. There's repentance and then there's repentance. It's one thing to say, "I'm sorry that I've stolen all these years. I'm not going to do it again anymore." It's another thing to say, "Wait, how much money do I have in my bank account? Alright, take half of that and give it to the poor." See, one is repentance: I'm sorry; I won't do this again. The other is reparation: I want to do something to fix—to help fix, to the best of my ability—the damage that my sin

has caused. So I mean...this is a radical act on his part. I don't know how much money you have in the bank — if you're a consecrated religious you might not have any money in the bank — but let's say...think about what you have in the bank right now, what you own, what your assets are, whatever. Think about saying, I'm cutting that in half, half of that, it goes to the poor right now and you don't look back. That's Zacchaeus.

Just being in the presence of Christ, just Christ expressing the desire for communion with him, moves him not only just to be sorry for what he's done, but to immediately want to make reparation and start to give alms to the poor. And we've seen throughout the Gospel of Luke, if you give alms to the poor, what are you doing? You're building up treasure in Heaven. So that's the first point. Half of what I have...alms, it goes to the poor.

Second. If I've defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it—not onefold, not twofold, not threefold, but fourfold. So again, I want you to think about that. Maybe you've made the mistake of stealing in your life; maybe you've committed theft at some point. How much was it? Did you return it? Did you double it? Did you triple it? Did you quadruple it? Because Zacchaeus quadrupled it. So if I've defrauded anyone, I'm not just going to say, "I'm sorry I stole from you. Please forgive me." That's repentance. I want to make reparation. And I don't just want to make reparation of equivalence, I want to go above and beyond. I'm going to restore it fourfold. So maybe you stole \$100 from someone, maybe you stole \$1000...maybe you stole \$10,000. If Zacchaeus had stolen \$10,000, he would give back \$40,000. If he stole \$1,000, he'd give back \$4,000. If he stole \$100, he'd give back \$400. This is radical repentance on Zacchaeus' part. He wants to make up for the wrong that he's done.

And you might be wondering, wow, why do we say that? Again, as always—almost always—the Jewish background is essential for understanding it. Basically, what Zacchaeus here is doing is following the law. If you go back to the book of Exodus 22:1-2, there are actually some laws about theft and restitution and reparation of the damage. And one of the laws actually says that if you steal from someone, you would repay them fourfold. So for example, and I'm quoting here:

If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. He shall make restitution... (Exodus 22:1-2)

And I didn't put this on the handout for today, but in *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The New Testament* that I'm writing right now, in the chapter on Luke, I point out that Josephus actually kind of takes this passage and says this is the norm. If someone has engaged in an act of theft and they're found out, they have to restore it fourfold. And you can imagine that a sheep would be a kind of unitive measure that everyone's familiar with because it's an agricultural society. It's very much involved with shepherding at its core. So by saying, "I'm going to restore it fourfold" — very crucial to note Zacchaeus is saying that — because although he might not be keeping the Jewish law, he knows the Jewish law, he knows the Torah, and the Torah requires fourfold reparation in a case of the theft of a sheep, so he's applying that to any defrauding that he might have done.

So where does he get this idea of restoring and making reparation? He gets it from Judaism. He gets it from the Jewish law. So those principles are already in place in the Jewish Torah. And what's fascinating about this as well, remember I mentioned Zacchaeus' name means innocent or righteous? What's fascinating about that is by the end of this parable, he's actually doing righteousness, because in Jewish tradition, almsgiving is actually known as *tzedakah*—righteousness. Fascinating. So to give to the poor was so quintessentially considered a righteous act, that the very act of almsgiving itself is called *tzedakah*, righteousness. So what is Zacchaeus doing? He is opening his hand to the poor. He's going to give half of his goods to the poor, and thereby he's engaging in an act of *tzedakah*, righteousness. Again, where does he get this idea from? Jewish law. Deuteronomy 15:11 says:

For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.

So notice that. In Jewish tradition, giving alms to the poor was considered a *mitzvah*. It's considered a commandment, because God says, "I command you, open wide your hand to the poor." So in contemporary times, you'll frequently

have people discuss almsgiving as if it's preferential. "Well, you know...do you give to the poor?" "I don't know. Do you give to the poor?" "Maybe I'll give to the poor or maybe I won't. Maybe I'll just give money to the Church. Maybe I'll dedicate my time and my talent...maybe not my treasure." Okay, that's not how it worked in the first century AD. Almsgiving is a commandment of God. And people like Zacchaeus, who are tax collectors who didn't keep the commandments, didn't give to the poor. But as soon as Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, he's immediately moved to follow the commandment to give to the poor. So this is a real lesson for us; it's very powerful and important. "I command you, open wide your hand to your brother." It's a *mitzvah*. It's a commandment of God. It's not an option for Christians to give to the poor. It's a commandment. At least that's how it was in the first century AD with Judaism and, if you just read through the New Testament... just read through the sermon on the mount. Jesus is going to say, Matthew—what is it?—5 or 6 (one of the two)...“when you give alms.” Not “if you give alms”...“when you give alms.” He's presuming it. He doesn't feel like He has to exhort it, because it's already been commanded by God in the Old Testament.

So when Zacchaeus responds in this way to Jesus, what does Jesus say?

Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.
(Luke 19:9)

Now why does Jesus bring up Abraham? What's the...Why does He say that here? Well, two reasons. First, remember Zacchaeus is a tax collector, so he's regarded as being like outside the pale—you know, beyond mercy, beyond the pale. Okay, he's a sinner; he's living in a perpetual state of sin. However, even though he's breaking that law, he's still a circumcised Jew. He's still a member of the covenant with Abraham, and so what Jesus is in a sense implying here is, in so far as he's a son of Abraham, he's not beyond the pale. He's not beyond mercy, and in fact, the fact that he's willing to give to the poor and repay the damage from his theft shows “that today salvation has come to this house” in the form of his repentance.

However, there's another level of meaning, too. I think it's almost a kind of double entendre, a kind of play on words—multiple meanings. Because when Jesus says “salvation has come to this house today,” it's interesting that He says that in the

context of He, Himself coming to Zacchaeus' house. "Zacchaeus"—what does he say earlier? "I must stay at your house today." So does Luke mean that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house because Zacchaeus has repented or because Jesus has come to his house? And the answer is both. The reason he has repented is precisely because Jesus has come into his home and obviously into his heart as well.

And Jesus uses this opportunity of the repentance of a tax collector like Zacchaeus to reveal the nature of His mission. The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. He's pursuing Zacchaeus in order to bring about his salvation. And the same thing needs to be the posture of the Church today. The Church exists for mission. The Church exists to bring the Good News of salvation to a world that desperately needs it. The Church does not exist to just kind of sustain itself, status quo, keep things running—you know, keep the parish going. The Church exists for the salvation of souls. The Church has the same mission that the Son of man has. And so the question that the parable raises for us is, in what way am I carrying on Christ's mission to seek and to save the lost? Or am I like the crowd murmuring, "Oh gosh. He's going to eat in the house of a sinner"?

Alright, Old Testament. The passage for today is from the Wisdom of Solomon—loving all these passages from the Catholic Old Testament books that are only in our Bible. Wisdom of Solomon, right before Sirach. This is what it says...it's kind of speaking to God:

Because the whole world before thee is like a speck that tips the scales,
and like a drop of morning dew that falls upon the ground.
But thou art merciful to all, for thou canst do all things,
and thou dost overlook men's sins, that they may repent.
For thou lovest all things that exist,
and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made,
for thou wouldst not have made anything if thou hadst hated it.
How would anything have endured if thou hadst not willed it?
Or how would anything not called forth by thee have been preserved?
Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living.
For thy immortal spirit is in all things.

Therefore thou dost correct little by little those who trespass,
and dost remind and warn them of the things wherein they sin,
that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in thee, O Lord.

So, what's the upshot of this Old Testament reading? It's real simple: God loves everything that He has made, even the IRS. That's why it's here, know the truth. He even loves IRS agents, okay. He loves the tax collectors. He hates nothing that He's made, and He loves all things that exist. They wouldn't exist if He didn't will them. They wouldn't exist if He didn't love them. And therefore, because of His love, He corrects little by little those who sin. He reminds them whereof they sin, so that they can be freed from wickedness and put their trust in Him, which is exactly what happens to Zacchaeus in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. He's done a lot of bad things in his life. But that doesn't make God stop loving Him. In fact, the Lord, in love, reaches out to him precisely so that he can turn away from his sin, and he can find the salvation that comes to his house in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so the psalm for today, Psalm 145, carries that theme of the mercy of God toward sinners across from the Old to the New Testament. In verse 8 and 9, it says:

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made. (Psalm 145:8-9)

Such a beautiful description of God, and it's so important for us to remember it too. I think a lot of times it can be easy to fall into an image or picture of God which is the opposite—the Lord is ungracious, He's not merciful, He's quick to anger, and He's abounding in wrath. And don't get me wrong, there is wrath. You'll see it not just in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament. God hates sin. He wants to eradicate sin from the world. He wants us to be righteous. At the same time, He's also merciful, gracious, and slow to anger. This is important. The Old Testament says God is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." That's not a New Testament revelation. That's part of the liturgy of Israel, the psalms that they would sing, affirming through prayer and song that the Lord is good to everyone and has

compassion over everything He has made — including rich tax collectors and thieves and corrupt officials and people who exploit others like Zacchaeus did in the first century AD.

So I'll close here with a quote from the living tradition. This is from St. Jerome, patron saint of Biblical scholars. He had a homily on the psalms, and this is what he said about Zacchaeus:

There certainly is much truth in a certain saying of a philosopher, "Every rich man is either wicked or the heir of wickedness." That is why the Lord and Savior says that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Someone may raise the objection, "How did wealthy Zacchaeus enter the kingdom of heaven?" He gave away his wealth and immediately replaced it with the riches of the heavenly kingdom. The Lord and Savior did not say that the rich would not enter the kingdom of heaven but that they will enter with difficulty."²

Very wise on Jerome's part. Some people, given the harshness of Jesus' teachings on wealth that we've seen throughout the Gospel of Luke, some people might be tempted to come to the conclusion that the poor go to Heaven and the rich be damned. But that's not the teaching of the Gospel, and the story of Zacchaeus really points that up. It shows that even the richest and even the wealthiest, even those who have engaged in the most exploitation of the poor and the widow and the orphan and those under them, in the strata of society, even they can be saved. It's not impossible, but it is difficult.

So what's the message for us? On a more spiritual level, there's a great quote from St. Augustine — one his sermons on the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus that I really love. It's about the sycamore tree. So Jerome's kind of interpreting the literal sense of the text here, but Augustine's thinking about this more at the level of the spiritual sense, a kind of mystical reading of the text. And I just couldn't help but share this with you. Just pray with this and ponder it. He says this:

² Jerome, *Homily on Psalm 83* [84]; in A. Just, Jr., Luke, 290

Say what you like, but for our part, let us climb the sycamore tree and see Jesus. The reason you cannot see Jesus is that you are ashamed to climb the sycamore tree. Let Zacchaeus grasp the sycamore tree, and let the humble person climb the cross. That is little enough, merely to climb it. We must not be ashamed of the cross of Christ, but we must fix it on our forehead, where the seat of shame is. Above where all our blushes show is the place we must firmly fix that for which we should never blush.”³

Kind of a beautiful, mystical interpretation there. So what’s Augustine doing? Well, he’s taking the fact that in the New Testament, the cross is repeatedly referred to as a tree, and he’s kind of fusing that into the image of the sycamore tree. And he’s saying, just as Zacchaeus was not ashamed to climb the sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, so we too should never be ashamed of the cross. And I think it’s interesting here that as far back as the fourth century, he’s already talking about the sign of the cross being something that’s made on the forehead of Christians. So when we blush, when we’re ashamed, we show it in our faces and our cheeks and on our forehead. So what Augustine’s saying is that the sign of the cross is marked on our forehead because it’s the seed of shame, because God wants to empower us, through the grace of our Baptism, to make the sign of the cross our own, and to never be afraid, to never be ashamed to climb up on the cross in order (like Zacchaeus) to see Jesus.

³ Augustine, *Sermon* 174.3; trans. in A. Just, Jr., Luke, 290-91