

## Homily for The Thirty First Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(03/11/19)

Last Sunday we read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, both praying in the Temple. Today the Gospel gives us another encounter with a tax collector. This time it is not a parable, a story made up by Jesus to illustrate a point and bring out a reaction from us. This time we are reading about a real tax collector, a man who really lived and really met Jesus. We even know his name, Zacchaeus.

It might be worth a quick diversion here to remind ourselves why tax collectors keep appearing in the Gospel, and just why they are so despised. The tax collectors gather taxes from the people of Israel, and hand them over to the Romans. So they take money from the people, and hand it to foreigners: they are making the nation poorer. But more than that, don't forget that in the book of Genesis God promised this land to Abraham and his descendants for ever; then he repeated the promise to Abraham's son Isaac, and just to get it completely clear, he then repeated the promise again to Isaac's son Jacob. This land was given to Abraham and his descendants, but it has been taken from them by the Romans. So the tax collector, who takes money from the people of Israel and hands it to the Romans, is a constant reminder that somehow the people of Israel have squandered and wasted and lost this land that had been given to them by God. Just the sight of the tax-collector is enough to remind people of how they have lost a gift that God had given them. Add to this the fact that the tax collectors were well known for helping themselves to a little extra from the people, and you can see that there is even more reason for them to be despised.

So its no wonder Zacchaeus seems to be alone; he is not going to be a man that has many friends. He wants to see Jesus, but the crowds are large. I suppose he could have pushed to the front, but he is happy to be up the tree. He chooses a place from which he can see this man, but he is at a certain distance. It should be a safe enough place from which to look on without getting involved. It should have been, but it isn't. Quite by chance (or perhaps by the working of divine providence) Zacchaeus has done exactly the very thing that we all need to do: He has put himself in a place that Jesus will pass by. Without realizing it Zacchaeus makes a decision that will turn his life round. He decides to go to a place where Christ will pass. And as he passes by, Christ sees in him one who is lost. Today's passage ends with 'the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost', so we know that finding and rescuing people just like Zacchaeus is exactly what the Lord is here for – so whatever his own expectations, Zacchaeus is never going to go home that day unchanged.

Now here is something worth thinking about: 'to seek out and save what was lost'. I think that we probably instantly read that and think of it as all about saving lost souls, that is to say rescuing souls on their way to destruction. Jesus comes to save people who have made bad decisions that have set them on the road to destruction. I am absolutely sure that this is, indeed, what it means. But what if it also means something more. What if the lost that Jesus has come to

save are not just those who are on the path to destruction, but also those who are, well, just lost: that is, people who don't know where they really are, and don't know where they are heading. They are moving about in a thick fog, and cannot know what they are heading towards, nor how far they are away from wonderful things, nor how far they are away from danger. They are lost in a different sense. They just don't know where they are, and don't know what is all around them. I think that Christ lives in his Church to seek out and find just such people, too, and bring them home, bring them to a place where they can find out who and what they really are. So many people seem to be lost, looking for the answer to the meaning of life in political ideology, or in pursuing material benefit, or in some kind of power or admiration, or in pleasure, but these are all just different versions of the fog that hides reality. Jesus said to his followers 'I am the way, the truth and the life', and that remains true for us. Where people are lost, looking for an answer to what life is really all about but unable to find an answer that satisfies, Jesus is, himself, the answer. He is the key to a life that makes sense; a life lived close to him, and only a life lived close to him, will allow us to say, although maybe not for a long while yet, 'yes, it all makes sense'.

'I am the way, the truth, and the life'. If this is so the wise person who wants to discover the way to live, the truth about humanity, the life that is fulfilled, will go searching for Jesus. He or she will do exactly what Zacchaeus, unknowingly does: place himself, herself, in the place where Christ will be passing by.

So I'd like to invite us all to do that this week. Instead of blundering around in the fog, let's put ourselves in the place where Christ will be passing by, and wait. He is already waiting for us, longing for us to meet him there. We have Mass almost every day somewhere in the parish, this is one of the places where we can wait for him, because he will pass by for sure. Just a little time of silence in the church, waiting in the place where he is resting in the Blessed Sacrament places us by the road he walks. To read just a few verses of the scriptures, or a spiritual book; to spend even just a few moments in prayer, to say a decade of the rosary, to talk with a friend about the faith you share, all of these are trees that we can climb to be sure of meeting him. Let's not leave it too long until we meet him once again, guiding us out of the fog of the lost, if we wait in a place where he will pass by.