

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirty First Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) 30<sup>th</sup> October 2022

The story of Zacchaeus shows us two very different reactions to the challenge that is presented by Jesus Christ. His challenge presents to us a vision of human living that is radically focussed on another: Jesus clearly, unambiguously, places the Father at the centre of all his decisions, all his actions. To look at Jesus is to be forced to confront the question: 'Will I live with God at the centre of my life?'

Zacchaeus has heard of Jesus. He is interested in seeing him – just seeing him, we are told, he is not expecting to hear him. So Zacchaeus makes a crucial decision: he will go to the place where Jesus is passing by and will climb a tree to look at him. He decides to go up the tree. Then Jesus arrives at the tree, and calls him down. He calls him down by name, so he clearly knows who this man is, and also clearly knows what he is, a leading tax collector. 'Come down, Zacchaeus'. Now the tax collector has another decision to make. Having decided to go up the tree, he must now decide whether or not to come down. How will he respond to these words? 'Hurry' Jesus says – in matters of salvation, there is no time to lose. Zacchaeus makes up his mind, comes down from the tree, and welcomes Jesus with joy.

Faced with the challenge to live a life centred on God, not on himself, the tax collector rises to the challenge and embraces it. Jesus has stirred up in him a thirst for something better. The thirst was there already (otherwise he wouldn't have climbed the tree) but Jesus has turned something like a scratchy throat into a burning thirst, and Zacchaeus feels he has to act. He was a lost man: he had lost his way, he was lost in selfishness, lost in greed, lost in isolation and rejection, lost in habits that trapped him. Like many lost people, he knew at some level that he was lost, but had no idea what to do about it, and did not have the courage to break the cycle, to reinvent himself, to take the risk of breaking with the past in the absence of any clear route map for the future. His meeting with Jesus gives him the courage to embrace change, and there is no stopping him. His rejection of the man he used to be, the life he used to live, is radical and extreme. The lost has been sought, and found, and saved.

Compare Zacchaeus with the people who look on and complain: 'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house' they say. This is even more revealing than it appears at first sight. We immediately pick up on the 'sinner's house'. But even more revealing is the 'gone' – it is clear that, for them, the sinner's house is somewhere alien, different from their own homes, somewhere 'out there' - they don't think of themselves as sinners at all: Jesus has gone somewhere other, somewhere a bit alien to them, somewhere with a hint of danger: the house of a sinner. They are shocked that he has gone to the house of a sinner. Imagine how different it would sound if they said: 'he has come to a sinner's house'. That would have sounded so different. Would you believe it, he has come to the house of one like us, one who is weak and flawed and lost. How excited someone would be who realised that this man of seemingly untouchable holiness was, in fact, willing to

come to his house, sit on his bench, eat his food from his table. What a difference a word makes: he has gone, he has come.

This story, which is so familiar, always contains the power to shock and surprise us, the power to ask us questions. Zacchaeus knows that he is something of a lost soul, but he doesn't know where to begin sorting himself out. In what ways are we a bit lost? In what ways are we looking in the wrong places for the answers to life's questions? In what ways are we placing our trust and our security in things that are not really secure at all, things that will let us down? Have we lost our focus, lost our cutting edge, lost our passion to be better, to change the world a little, even if it is just the world immediately around us? Have we put ourselves at the centre of the world? Have we kidded ourselves into thinking that the world out there is full of sinners who are very different to me? Have we fooled ourselves into thinking that our home is not a sinner's house?

'You spare all things' says the Book of Wisdom 'because all things are yours, Lord, lover of life'. Jesus Christ has a passion for life, and wants to save it and transform it. Zacchaeus caught some glimpse of that, and this is why he made the most fateful decision of his life: he came back down the tree.