

Homily for November 4, 2001  
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Wisdom 11:22-12:2  
2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2  
Luke 19:1-10

## *God is more merciful than we could ever be.*

Judging from the harsh things Jesus said about wealth and privilege in Saint Luke's gospel we might reason it well nigh impossible for a rich person not only to enter the gates of heaven but also to come into the good graces of God himself.

Zacchaeus was rich. A prominent tax collector, he even seemed able to look with a critical eye toward his practices of possible fraud. He may have been small in stature, but he was definitely into big-time operations.

It also happens that he wanted to see what Jesus was like. So, running ahead of the big crowd's rush he climbed a sycamore to see what he could see.

It's an interesting scene, unlike my own imagined scenario. I would have Jesus, eyes aflame, look at the conniver and warn him of his impending doom. Jesus would then launch into a rousing condemnation of exploitation and injustice. Zacchaeus would serve as prime example. But notice, the Christ of Saint Luke's gospel (a gospel, mind you, that is one of the harshest in denouncing riches and the oppression of the poor) this Christ once again confounds expectations. "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house."

Now, if it were up to me, I would have at least put some conditions on my visit – if I were Jesus Christ. "Do you promise to turn away from your greedy behavior?" I'd ask. "Are you willing to abandon the errant way of your business and your lifestyle?" Why do these things not cross the mind of Jesus? He has preached about greed often enough. And here's a real live capitalist pig he could whale into; but instead, he asks to be invited home. Needless to say, Zacchaeus was thrilled. He welcomed Jesus with delight.

"When they all saw this they began to grumble..." I have to admit I would be among the murmurers, the nay sayers. This tax collecting creep has gone his merry way making his commission on the backs of the poor. Now, on a whim, he climbs up into a tree to see Jesus (who all of us want to talk to and have been following for months) and he gets an interview, just like that. A money-grubber! The gang would support me in this. To think, that Jesus is going to have dinner with the likes of Zacchaeus.

It is always fascinating to see how God in Jesus treats sinners, whether it's tax collectors, liars, adulterers, cowards. It's a wonder how God in Jesus Christ deals with them, how he deals with us all, how he deals with all things. Clearly, Jesus is interested in the energy and the desire of this little man. He seems impressed by the fact that Zacchaeus would go to such

lengths to see him – demeaning himself to the point of climbing a tree – and would eventually stand his ground before the daunting crowd. It is Zacchaeus' heart, his hope that draws Jesus.

The fact that Jesus liked him seemed to have an immediate effect on Zacchaeus. "Behold, half of my possession, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over." Even here, I think Jesus was too soft. I would have said, "Only half? what about the other fifty percent? And what do you mean 'if I have extorted?' Be more specific." But no! Jesus announces salvation to the whole house of Zacchaeus and calls him, believe it or not, "a descendant of Abraham." That's that. "The Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

And so, once again, my paltry prudence, my so called sense of justice shrinks in the presence of Divine Wisdom, before whom the whole universe is like a grain of sand or a drop of morning dew on the earth. God, indeed, overlooks our sins so that we might repent and thereby change. Such is the manner of Infinite mercy.

"For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. How could a thing remain unless you willed it; or be preserved had it not been called forth by you? You spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls," says Wisdom chapter 11. That goes for Zacchaeus. That goes for us too – each and every one.

What the book of Wisdom tells us is that we could not even exist if we were not loved by God. The very fact that we live without causing our own existence is proof that we are loved into being. We could not have been made, could not endure an instant unless we were willed and wanted.

We, brothers and sisters of Zacchaeus, more splendidly endowed than other creatures, have an extra gift. It is more desirable than the majesty of mountains, more thrilling than the speed of the finest gazelle. God, that lover of souls, wants most of all, to share that gift in us. It is the gift we share with Zacchaeus, no matter how rich or poor, how young or old, how virtuous or sinful we might be. We are gifted with a question at the root of our being. We want to see Jesus – we want to see the God revealed in Jesus and ask the questions that will give the meaning of human life. And even in the worst of times, we journey to this table and to this gathering, and even climb trees to find out what the answer might be.

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