

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

REFLECTION 1: FINDING THE LOST

Some years ago, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I visited the town of Jericho where the events related in today's Gospel took place (Luke 19:1-10). Jericho at the time of Jesus was a very important and wealthy town. It lay in the Jordan Valley and had a palm forest. Josephus the historian refers to it as a 'divine region, the fattest in Palestine'. It was also known as the greatest tax centre in the Holy Land. Here was located the home of a tax collector, Zaachaeus, who had reached the top of his profession and was the most hated man in the district.

Zaachaeus was wealthy, but he was also a lonely man. He had chosen a way of life that made him an outcast. He had heard of Jesus who had welcomed tax collectors and sinners and he was wondering if he might have a word with him. Despised and hated, yet this man was craving God's love. Zaachaeus was determined to see Jesus and would let nothing stop him. For Zaachaeus to mingle with the crowd was a dangerous thing to do, some might assault him, kick him or mug him. So, he ran on ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to get a better vantage point. This little man had the courage of desperation. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and spoke to him, 'Zaachaeus come down, hurry, because I must stay in your house today'. The Son of Man who seeks and saves what is lost is calling him. The crowds, including Jesus' disciples are aghast, that Jesus was going to stay at a sinner's house. Zaachaeus hurried down and joyfully welcomed Jesus. This is sheer messianic joy – a joy so closely allied to repentance. And so Zaachaeus pours out his confession; no laundry list of misdeeds are recorded, but Zaachaeus goes directly to spell out his sincere amendment - half his property is going to the poor and those he cheated would be paid four times the amount. Zaachaeus observes the most stringent demands of the law in this regard. A testimony is worthless unless it is backed up by deeds.

The story ends with great words, 'the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost'. The word 'lost' in the New Testament does not mean damned or doomed, it simply means 'in the wrong place'. A person is lost when he or she has wandered away from God and is found once again, when that person in loving response rejoins the household of God's people. Luke reminds his readers that the heart is symbolised by the sharing of one's possessions. The one who clings to his/her wealth is closed off to the prophet's call, but the one who shares generously with the poor can welcome the prophet gladly. Our Merciful God in Jesus Christ waits patiently for our conversion and although we have failed, he still calls us and encourages us to a homecoming.

REFLECTION 2:

STRIVING TO SEE

I remember the first time I went to see a match in Croke Park. I was bitterly disappointed - all I could view were the coats of the people in front of me and no matter how I manoeuvred it was the same. My lack of height defeated me - I was too small. I can identify with the short Zacchaeus in today's Gospel!

One of the things that struck me in this passage is how Jesus and Zacchaeus sought each other out. Zacchaeus climbed up a tree to get a better vantage point from which to see Jesus. Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, saying, 'Zacchaeus come down quickly: for today I must stay at your house'. And the joy is palpable between them. Jesus searches for us too. He calls us by name and desires to come to our house. We should find great joy in that initiative. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' acceptance by giving away half his possessions to the poor and going above and beyond in repaying those he had extorted in his job as a tax collector. His generosity came from a sense of being accepted and forgiven.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem as he passed through Jericho. He was on his way to his crucifixion, yet he took every opportunity to save those entrusted to him. As it says at the end of the Gospel, 'for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what is lost'.

We must always be careful how we take the meaning of this word 'lost'. In the New Testament it does not mean damned or doomed. It simply means in the wrong place and when we find such a thing, we return it to the place it ought to occupy. A person is lost when he or she has wandered away from God and is found when once again that person occupies a rightful place as a much-loved child in the household and the family of the Father. As in this episode we ask ourselves are there trees we are willing to climb in order to find a deeper relationship with God? How will we respond when we encounter God's love?