

Story of a short man in my neighboring village. How he crossed the flooded river. I used to feel sorry for this short man. I don't think anyone will feel sorry for the short man in today's Gospel Reading from St. Luke. A high-ranking IRS man – Zacchaeus, the chief tax-collector of Jericho. The Gospels speak about tax collectors many times. But this is the only time we here about the chief tax collector Zacchaeus.

And according to Gospel of Luke, Zacchaeus was physically short, and so, he could not see the Lord. But let me ask you, do you think that Luke has told us this merely to indicate his physical stature? I don't think so. When Luke tells us that he was short in stature, then he wants to tell us more than being merely physically short, he wants to tell us that he was also morally short. And this moral shortness precisely prevented him from seeing Jesus. Zacchaeus could not see the Lord because of the blindness sin brings.

So, sin brings blindness, an inability to see the Lord. Now Zacchaeus has fallen short through sin and hence he could not see Jesus. “How has he sinned?” You might say. Well, he is the chief tax collector of Jericho. Tax collectors were wicked men, The Romans recruited the mobsters of that day to collect taxes. These were bad guys. They ruffed people up and extorted money from them. The Romans permitted them to charge beyond the tax as their “cut” of the deal. They were corrupt, they exploited the poor and schmoozed the powerful. These were men who were both feared and hated, and for good reason. They were, to a man, wicked and unjust. Zacchaeus was not just any Tax Collector; he was *Chief* Tax collector. He was a mafia boss, a Don, a “Godfather.” Got the picture? Zacchaeus isn't just physically short. He's the lowest of the low, he doesn't measure up morally, he comes up short in terms of justice, he's a financial giant, but a moral midget. He cannot see the Lord is not just a physical problem, it is a moral one.

If it were just physical problem, the crowd could have perhaps allowed him to stand in the front so that he could easily see the Lord. But, because of his sins, nobody wanted to associate with him or stand by him. People hated all the tax collectors and here Zacchaeus was their head. So, he had no place in the crowd of the ordinary people.

So, why on earth did he want to see Jesus? He was a rich man. He had everything money could buy? Well not everything. Nevertheless, Zacchaeus' wealth did not satisfy his deepest needs. Despite his wealth and the pleasures and comfort he enjoyed, he was apparently empty and lonely within. Why else would he have climbed a tree to see an itinerant teacher and preacher named Jesus? Why would he a short man, rich man, well-dressed man take the trouble to climb a tree. If it was anybody else who climbed a sycamore tree it would not be a surprise. Seeing him climb a tree or on the tree crowd must have laughed at him. But he did not care. By all means he wanted to see Jesus and perhaps he thought Jesus could have the answers to his empty life.

More than likely, Zacchaeus was experiencing the beginning of faith stirring within his heart. So, he wanted to know more about this man who was causing such an impact in the society. He had perhaps heard reports about Jesus being the Messiah. Maybe he heard about Jesus calling Matthew, another tax collector, to be one of his disciples. Zacchaeus may have begun to believe these reports and to hope that they were true. His efforts to see Jesus and his resulting response to Jesus are evidence that there was some strong impulse driving him toward spiritual growth.

Jesus stops by that tree, and Zacchaeus meets Jesus and new Zacchaeus begins to emerge. He opens up himself for others.

We may not be physically short but we all are morally short. Our sins blind us and we cannot see the Lord. Like Zacchaeus we may be also going through emptiness in our lives despite having everything materially speaking. The Lord is asking each one of us to come down from the tree of our sins and look at the tree of the cross. Just like Zacchaeus this will open up a new relationship with God as well as with others.

So, we all need to come down from the sycamore tree of our sins and climb the tree of the cross to Jesus. Each Mass is commemoration of the sacrifice of the cross and here we can meet and see Jesus in the form of the bread and wine. Just, as Zacchaeus went through a transformation after meeting Jesus, we all are invited to have the same transformation of helping and serving others.