

ZACCHAEUS SUNDAY Luke 19:1-10

Today we come to the Sunday which introduces us to the interesting character of Zacchaeus. On the pathway to Lent there are the Sundays before Lent and the Sundays before the Sundays before and Zacchaeus Sunday stands at the beginning of the latter. He is a chief tax collector, a profession which is despised in the ancient Roman world, because as he admits in his own words, he has like others 'defrauded' many by imposing a tax much higher than what was due and dishonestly pocketing the difference. In our contemporary society this position of being the 'most hated profession' has been usurped by other more competitive candidates than the taxman, at whom McCartney and Lennon directed their venom in one of their songs. Some years ago estate agents occupied this prime position but today it is unquestionably the profession of bankers particularly those in the investment sector who are universally loathed and are the butt of many jokes. Though perhaps I am mistaken and it is politicians who are vying for this accolade in these uncertain and divided times of Brexit.

The story of Zacchaeus is recorded only in the Gospel of St Luke although Jesus' arrival in Jericho is mentioned in the other gospels. But it has a direct link with the Feast of the Theophany which has just ended through the priest's visiting and blessing of homes. The short prayer which is said by the priest before he goes through the rooms sprinkling them with holy water asks Christ to come into the house of those present not symbolically but literally as He condescended to enter the house of Zacchaeus bringing salvation to him and to all his house. The meeting with Zacchaeus we can see clearly from the text is truly life-changing. We see the light of Christ coming to the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali as we read two weeks ago and here He is preaching and entering into an encounter with those who receive this light in their darkness and will never be the same again. In the case of Zacchaeus it is his interest which is aroused and causes him to desire to see this 'teacher' of whom everybody is talking. He climbs up a tree. No mean feat though we do not know his age. But Christ is already waiting for him like the father waiting for the son to return home and invites himself in to his home. Amongst the Jews according to the Levitical law if anyone admitted to cheating another he had to confess his sin, make a sin offering in the temple, restore in full to the victim or his family the amount which had been wrongfully appropriated and add a fifth on top. My fellow priests might also like to know that if the wronged person had no living relatives then the money went to the priest. But Zacchaeus goes much further than this amount by restoring property he has stolen four times as well as giving half of his goods to the poor. We are told in the account that he was rich and we can imagine how rich since he was a chief tax collector. But the account reveals a joy in the man's heart at finding something which is missing from his life, which no amount of wealth can satisfy. Christ gives different names to this: the pearl of great price, the Kingdom of Heaven and he calls him 'a son of Abraham' not because of his Jewish ancestry but because like Abraham he finds faith in God and in the same way learns to trust his promises.

We visit this account every year and its purpose is to remind us of the simple joy we have at being 'In Christ'. The Orthodox Church takes us along a familiar fixed path in the texts that are appointed. It will be some weeks before we open the book called the Lenten Triodion which will take us up to Pascha itself but the path we are treading will begin to take us through various spiritual stages. "Oh no! Do I hear, we have only just finished the Advent fast?" If we are honest I suspect we can all own up to feeling that to some degree. But the texts we will read in these prefatory weeks are designed to turn us away from ourselves and our physical and material wants and begin to search out and reclaim that pristine joy of meeting Christ by looking slowly inwards towards God.

The story of Zacchaeus, as I have said, highlights the joy of somebody encountering Christ personally and his experience reminds us of our own meeting with the risen Christ. Our spiritual journey does not simply end with finding God and then, like in the parable of the sower, with the seed that falls on soil which has no depth springing up and then dying away. It involves taking up our cross daily as Christ warns us. To this end we have the reassurance that God is with us in our trials and tribulations, the same promise that he made to Abraham. “I shall never leave you or forsake you” is a verse that we hear in the epistle of the Hebrews. In the week I received a message from Jason and Lauren, who left this community last year. As you know they were “down on their luck” as we say, or going through really difficult times financially and in employment and had been forced to return to parents for help. Apparently, Jason has found a job in the University of Edinburgh which he really likes and is probably permanent. And they are now expecting their second child in August. The clouds have parted and the light has returned to reveal God’s faithfulness to those who serve him.

This change of mind or re-directing our lives is not just reserved for our past experience and for others. If that were the case why would we all assent as I mentioned some weeks ago with ‘Lord have mercy’ when the priest sings ‘that we may pass the remaining time of our lives in peace and repentance, let us pray to the Lord’. This change which we see in Zacchaeus continues to take place in all of us. We are told that God yearns jealously about the Spirit which he has made to live within us. That Spirit has come to live in us in baptism and it is not something that remains static and inert within ourselves. It can do if we neglect it and do not cultivate it with prayer, fasting and above all our Heavenly Food, communion, all the means which the Church offers to keep us spiritually alive and well nourished and to maintain our simple joy that we are known and loved by God. There are times in our lives too when we have to make a major step forward in our relationship with God. Today is the 27th anniversary of my, or rather our ordination to the diaconate since a wife is very actively involved in the process. The call came, as we say, ‘out of the blue’ but something inside told me to go forward. This is not a unique experience but common. Blindness about our future is taken away and a path forward is opened up to us which we are drawn along to see more, exactly like Zacchaeus.

There is a parallel in our spiritual growth and our relationship with the Church. Some feel the call to take a greater burden and responsibility in the work and governance of the Church through the choir, ordination to one of the many orders, to serve on the parish councils etc. Others are not ready yet or suited to this. There is no fault or failure or sin in this. We are where we are and God accepts this and meets us there. But at the same time for all of us Christ comes to each as to Zacchaeus and challenges us to a greater commitment and paradoxically to a greater freedom and joy in Him with the words, “Make haste and come down for I must stay at your house (i.e. the house of your soul) today”. God grant us all that same desire of Zacchaeus to see Him in such a new and inspiring way that results in a deeper and more lasting commitment from us, his humble but trusting servants.

