ZACCHAEUS SUNDAY Luke 19:1-10

In our journey towards the Great Fast we have come to the Sunday which introduces us to the interesting character of Zacchaeus. 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’ no doubt many by imposing a tax much higher than what was due and dishonestly pocketing the difference. This contrasts most strikingly with our senior tax collector, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who in great benevolence and generosity imposes a tax on global corporations like Google operating in Britain at a much lower level than what they really owe. So tax collectors can’t be all bad and in the Gospels Jesus seems to enjoy their company, even having one, Matthew, in his entourage. But despite his wealth Zacchaeus ‘sought to see Jesus who he was’. Like so many at the time he has heard the rumours about the healings and teachings of Jesus and was intrigued. The Gospels tell us that ‘power went forth from him and he healed them all’ and that he taught, not like the scribes but with authority. The account indicates that he is looking for something more despite the fact that he is at the top of his profession and is rich.

As he is a small man he climbs a sycamore tree in order to see the Lord, who knows in advance what is going on inside him and takes the initiative by calling him and inviting himself to dinner at his home. This act of Jesus recalls the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. He is out there on the road ‘while at a distance’ waiting to receive his lost son. If we were honest with ourselves most of us would be sitting at home expecting an apology and an act of remorse. But God does not work like this. Christ tells him to come down quickly and at the subsequent meeting which takes place Zacchaeus hears the words of life; he drinks the waters which will cause him never to thirst, and a profound repentance or change of heart takes place, which is followed by a change of life. Half of his goods are given to the poor and those he has defrauded are repaid 4 times. This is much more than the Mosaic Law prescribes. Christ proclaims that ‘Today salvation has come to this house’. But then he describes him as a ‘Son of Abraham’. Of course, he is ethnically a son of Abraham because he is a Jew and descended from Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, but there is more to this term than just a racial categorisation. Abraham is famous for believing God’s promise and St Paul tells us that this ‘faith is reckoned to him as righteousness’ unlike works of the Law; so Zacchaeus and us, who trust God, are also sons of Abraham like that long list in the Epistle to the Hebrews chapter 11 which appeared in the lectionary readings of just over a week ago of those who had faith but, unlike us, knew that they would not see what God had planned in their lifetime.

But this change of mind or repentance is not just reserved for our past experience and for others. If that were the case why would you all assent 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’. Today’s Gospel conveys to us the excitement of a changed life and a moving more deeply, shall we say, into God and therefore into ourselves. In the case of Zacchaeus he goes forward with uncertainty. He has to climb a tree to find Christ. He is challenged to respond positively to Christ inviting himself into his home. But the joy of discovering Christ for himself takes him much further than the dullness and dissatisfaction of the wealth he has dishonestly accumulated.

In a similar way this change is taking place in all of us. The Holy 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. There are times in our lives too when we have to make a step forward in our relationship with God.

But this step forward in spiritual terms is not unlike the physical, psychological and emotional stages of growth which most of us pass through. We reach adolescence and we discover feelings we had never had before. We find ourselves a girlfriend or boyfriend (or even several of them). We leave home, perhaps pursue further education. Embark on a career. Then we look for a longer and more lasting relationship and someone, a friend, whom we would be happy to marry and spend the rest of our lives. Then we feel there is something missing and we have children. All of these involve a courageous step forward and responsibility, some more than others especially the last one.

There is a parallel in our spiritual growth and our relationship with the Church. St Paul talks about those who feed on milk and those who are ready for solid food as an analogy of those who are new in the faith (babes in Christ) and those who are mature or spiritual. 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 and need to be more patient remembering the statement that “God yearns jealously over the Spirit which he has made to live in us. He gives more grace”. But for all of us Christ comes assuredly to each as to Zacchaeus and challenges us with the words, “Make haste and come down for I must stay at your house (i.e. the house of your soul) today”.

*31st January 2021, Oxford*