ZACCHAEUS SUNDAY Luke 19:1-10

Today we come to the first marker on the path towards Great Lent. On this path there are the Sundays before Lent and the Sundays before the Sundays before and Zacchaeus Sunday stands at the beginning of the latter. It describes the Lord’s uninvited visit to one of the most despised characters in the Roman world, namely a ‘publicanus’ or tax collector, literally one who collected revenue on behalf of the state. And we might interject ‘and added a substantial sum for his own pocket too’. It is said that he was a chief tax collector so he must have been very good at fleecing people on behalf of the occupying Romans who were constantly bleeding the provinces in order to satisfy their thirst for luxuries of many kinds. This of course is the background to the Holy Family’s journey home.

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 saw the light of Christ coming to the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali 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.

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 into 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. If the wronged person had no living relatives then the money went to the priest. But Zacchaeus goes much further than this stipulated sum 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 as I said he was a chief tax collector. But unexpectedly 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. “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”, as St Paul puts it quoting Genesis.

But how totally different is Christ’s attitude to a known sinner from that of the crowd. “When they saw it they all murmured, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of one who is a sinner’.” But Christ says, “Make haste and come down for I must stay at your house today”. We too should not judge or decide who is worthy to receive the light of Christ’s Kingdom. Only He knows whose heart is ready to receive him. Our attitude should be as we say in Matins, “The stone which the builders rejected, the same has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvellous in our eyes.” Christ’s life and ministry illustrates this perfectly as he meets condemnation for mixing with those who do not have, as we say, ‘social approval’.

The intriguing aspect of this encounter is how Christ knows the state of Zacchaeus’ soul and how he is looking for God. He picks him out from the huge crowd and in a short time opens his eyes to the message of the Kingdom. It is a pity that we do not hear more about this encounter and his life in Christ. The same applies to us and our relationship with him. We are told in comforting words that the hairs on our heads are numbered. And St Paul tells us to ‘cast our cares upon Him as He cares about you’. Each of us is special to Our Lord.

The story of Zacchaeus 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 urges 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.

This change of mind or re-directing our lives is not just reserved for our past experience and for others. It 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. It can do if we neglect it and do not cultivate it with repentance, confession, 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 31st anniversary of my, or rather our ordination to the diaconate since a wife is intrinsically and actively involved in the process. The call came, as we say, ‘out of the blue’ but something inside told us to go forward. This is not a unique experience but common. Blindness and uncertainty 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 will come to each as to Zacchaeus and encourage 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.

*Oxford, 22nd January 2023*