

Thirty-first Sunday Per Annum (C)
October 30, 2016.

For the Son of Man has come to seek and save what was lost. (Lk. 19:10)

The conversion of Zacchaeus may be said to be a consequence of our Lord's preaching. Last Sunday we heard the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee and given the sequence in the narrative, it is possible that Zacchaeus had been told of this parable or perhaps, he had heard it himself. Jesus had addressed that *parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else* (Lk. 18:9). Perhaps the heart of Zacchaeus had been touched by the hearing of this parable and for this reason, as Jesus *was passing through* the town of Jericho, he now *was seeking to see who Jesus was* (Lk. 19:3). It is possible that as an outcast, Zacchaeus had come to despise others, just as he was despised. This is sometimes the sad consequence of hatred and ostracism. When for whatever reason people are excluded and even just ignored this isolation can easily result in an attitude of resentment and hostility. The salvation that Our Lord offers us is such that it also delivers us from attitudes and behaviours that hurt our own selves as much as they can hurt others. How liberating it must have been for Zacchaeus to hear these words: *'Today salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost'* (Lk. 19:10).

Yet before this declaration could be made, Zacchaeus had to acknowledge that he had despised others through extortion. It would seem from his response to Our Lord that he was a very wealthy man. *'Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over'* (Lk. 19:9). If his hurrying to climb a sycamore tree so that he could see Jesus gives us a visual image of his desire for mercy, then his coming down to encounter Jesus represents a liminal moment, a threshold as it were, as he accepts the offer of forgiveness and mercy. *'Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house'* (Lk. 19:5). What was it that took place in the heart of Zacchaeus as he responded to the offer of mercy? We can only surmise, but it cannot be much different than what took place in the heart of another tax collector, the Evangelist St. Matthew, who left everything and followed Jesus (Lk. 5:27). There is something dramatic about their response to God's offer of mercy and salvation.

Salvation is always a gift. The initiative on God's part, addresses the misery and insufficiency of the human condition. God first comes to us as a judge and upholder of His own right order. Only then does He come as forgiving. Mercy without judgment bypasses free will. Were this case, everything concerning us would be completely unintelligible. Our Lord came to teach the world of its sins, but also *why* and *how* to repent of them. God's mercy begins when the sins stop and they are judged by the sinner and by God for what they are. Sin, even the worst, can be forgiven; but nothing unacknowledged and not properly repented is forgiven. Were this not so, we could never in grace be fit for God's Kingdom. God does not prefer us weak and sinful. His gift of salvation is an offer of freedom and joy in the Holy Spirit. By His grace we are made worthy of His call and as we grow in grace we produce the fruits of the Spirit in abundance: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (Gal. 5:22-23). God wants us good and holy; strong in grace and radiant in holiness.

The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Lk. 19:10). This is what we learn from the story of Zacchaeus and from our own stories. In the exercise of our free will we respond to God's saving truth and rightly we acknowledge that there are standards of conduct and truthfulness to which all of us must conform. This is not arbitrary or cruel or lacking in mercy. Indeed, these standards are written in the heart of every man by God Himself (Cf. *Rom. 2:15*). Zacchaeus received the offer of mercy; an offer which excludes no one but can only include those who submit to judgment. His encounter with Jesus, Way, Truth and Life was a moment of truth and judgment. Not only did he acknowledge the evil of his ways; he made reparation, that it might be clearly seen that this work of salvation had truly been wrought in God. *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 (Lk. 19:9).* And so it must be for each one of us if we wish to accept and receive the offer of salvation. The Saviour comes to us and with mercy confronts us with the truth that tears away the veil of self-deception. Then and only then do we become capable of knowing the God of mercy and salvation; and ourselves as sons and daughters of this mercy. As Pope Benedict expressed it, *And only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is.... There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him (Homily, Sunday, April 24, 2005).* So it was for Zacchaeus at whose house Jesus stayed; and so it is for us who receive our Lord in the intimacy of our lives. This indwelling of God through grace is what we must guard and cherish above all else – the *state of grace*.

The history of the Church is in this light comprised of individual histories; of encounters and conversions, some gradual some dramatic, of repentance and transformation in Christ. As St. Luke records the story of Zacchaeus he tells us simply that *Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it (Lk. 19:1)*. The great teacher of our faith, St. Augustine has left us an unparalleled account of his encounter with Our Lord in his autobiography, his *Confessions*. Very candidly he writes of his long search for God and of the danger we face when we are for whatever reason inattentive or distracted: *Where was I when was seeking for you? You were there before me, but I had departed from myself. I could not even find myself, much less you (Book V, 2)*. Clearly, it is indeed possible to lose our very selves and fail to recognize the offer of salvation which God's word of truth always offers us. Years later, as a Bishop solicitous for the salvation of his flock, he preached these words: *I will speak then and speak plainly. For I fear Jesus 'passing by'... and therefore I cannot keep silence (Sermon XXXVIII, 13)*. This is to say that he feared not recognizing Our Lord as He comes to us in grace; in Word and Sacrament. Let us make our own this holy fear. Let us likewise be afraid; lest we fail to perceive His saving presence in our lives; but today, let us thank Him for He gently *corrects little by little those who trespass (Wis. 12:2)*; supporting all who are falling and raising up *all who are bowed down. (Ps. 145)*.