

HOMILY SUNDAY 31-C*
"Zaccheus the Tax Collector"

(Wisdom 11:23-12:2; Psalm 145; 2 Thes 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10)

What were the first words the Jesus preached?

"Repent; believe," and salvation will be yours.

Zachaeus lived those first words of Jesus. He was a tax collector unsatisfied with life; feeling incomplete, experiencing the human condition. Seeking more, He stepped out in faith to humble himself and climbed a tree. He wanted to see Jesus, hoping in something better.

The readings help us to see God more clearly. In the first reading we are reminded that God is merciful to all and overlooks peoples' sins so that they may repent. The psalm proclaims that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is compassionate to all; upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.

Building on this image of God, the gospel gives us an exemplary story of repentance. The book of Leviticus states that to make amends one must repay the amount plus 1/5th. Zacchaeus goes way beyond the law: four-fold restitution and half his possessions. He had found the friend, the intimacy, the love his heart was yearning for despite his status and wealth, and he put his trust in that relationship, enough to let go of half his possessions! Now that is genuine repentance, letting go of past behaviour. His emotional needs were met, and now he could let go of the addiction to the false gods of prestige and money which to that point were controlling his life, and making him lonely.

During a training session for the Returning To Spirit program that I was involved in, I had an experience of this gospel. The facilitator who developed the program, Marc Pizandawac, insisted that everyone be on time and would not start a session until everyone was there. One day two trainers slept in. We waited for fifteen minutes, with Mark murmuring that this was unacceptable. Finally someone went to fetch the two trainers. A few minutes later they entered the room sheepishly, apologizing profusely. To everyone's surprise, Mark called up different students to facilitate the session. It was obvious that he wanted a certain skill in handling this situation, but no one could do it. Then he took over, turned to the two late-comers, and said simply, "Do I have your word that you will never do this again?" which of course he obtained immediately, and the session started as usual.

What Marc wanted, what none of us could think of, was a declaration of behavioural change! An apology is incomplete without behavioural change. A few days later I was able to apply this learning to a strained relationship with my niece and her husband because of something I had said to her years earlier. I called them, reminded them of our strained relationship, gave them my assurance that it would never happen again, and it

worked. My niece's husband immediately responded to my declaration that he would act more warmly towards me, now that he had my word that the offending behaviour would never happen again. The change in me had freed them to change their behaviour towards me.

Another slant on this gospel came from Debbie at the Hopeview halfway house for drug and alcohol rehabilitation, who asked me to come over one day before doing her Step 5, so she could get to know me. In a sense, she was like Zaccheus in reverse, asking me to come to her so that she could check me out and see if I would be Jesus for her, accepting, forgiving, and not judging. Can we be Jesus for each other? Accepting, understanding and forgiving, instead of judging and complaining?

The story of Zaccheus is a tale of unexpected twists and reversals. A chief tax collector humbles himself by running and climbing a tree, but Jesus' ministry to the outcast and despised reaches the rich as well as the poor, tax collectors as well as harlots. Jesus has sought out and saved one who was lost. In response to Jesus' bestowal of favour, unexpected and unmerited, the rich tax collector joyfully pledged to bear "fruits worthy of repentance." Zaccheus thought he was seeking Jesus, but in reality Jesus was seeking Zaccheus. Thus salvation can come even to the house of tax collectors. Zaccheus just wanted to see Jesus, but by the end of the story he could say to God, "My eyes have seen your salvation."

Jesus is constantly passing through our lives. How are we responding to his invitation to come down out of our own tree of self-made security, addictions, attitudes, and let him become Lord? Are we ready to really repent, change our lives, and live his way? How do we treat others who are trying to change their lives?

The Eucharist we celebrate is another instance of "Jesus passing through our midst". What is our response? Can we be like Zaccheus and celebrate this event with joyful repentance, or just grumble and attend with hard, judgmental and unchanging hearts?

So, believe in God's merciful love; change your ways, and salvation, the kingdom of heaven, will be yours.