

### **A SHORT MAN - A LARGE OPEN HEART**

The Gospel story this Sunday about the short tax collector, Zacchaeus is one that we remember most likely because it does contain a bit of humor, something not that often seen in the Scriptures. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and would be passing through Jericho. Word of this preceded him and the local tax collector, Zacchaeus, heard of it and was determined to somehow see this man about whom he had heard so much. Zacchaeus was short in stature but large in resolve and with determination he climbed a tree and clung to a large branch where he had an unobstructed view of the road where Jesus would be walking by. No doubt those along the side of the road had grins on their faces to see this hated tax collector in such a ridiculous position.

As Jesus neared the tree, he suddenly stopped and looking up called out to Zacchaeus to come on down for he wished to stay in his house that night. There must have been a sudden hush in the crowd as they listened in stunned disbelief to Jesus' request. Tax collectors were despised; they were collaborators with the hated Romans and considered as traitors. Not only that they used their office to skim off more money than the Romans demanded, making small fortunes for themselves and there was nothing the citizens could do about it. The Romans certainly didn't care. Thus, tax collectors were all great sinners, the greatest of all sinners. Thus, the request of Jesus to Zacchaeus to stay with him just did not compute in their minds. Surely he must know just who Zacchaeus was. But for Zacchaeus this was totally unexpected and he just about fell out of the tree. But then as he faced Jesus he stood his ground. And to Jesus and the stunned crowd, he openly declares that if he has fleeced any individual he will pay him back fourfold and he will give half of his personal fortune to the poor. He was not going to be intimidated by the crowd who stood there in silence not believing what they heard. Then ever so gently Jesus looks upon Zacchaeus and says: "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what has been lost.

Thus Jesus invites himself to stay with this hated tax collector and he sits down to dine with him, all the while tasting the scorn of those who hated this man and in no way would ever forgive him. They would rather die first, so deep was their hatred. The forgiveness that Jesus preached simply went over their heads and in their hearts they considered the words of Jesus to be total heresy and even on the verge of blasphemy. They shut the doors of their hearts to hear the words of their savior and redeemer. Through all this the face of Jesus never changed, knowing in his heart how much they were wrong and how they were really suffering within themselves without knowing it or even knowing why.

And so once again we hear this story and chuckle a bit but just how much does it really mean to each of us? Everything that Jesus did or said, every incident that is reported in the Gospels, every least important mention was all in the mind of Jesus as he proceeded through his life, especially his public life. One might wonder just how Jesus did that but one must never forget that Jesus was also God and it is there that it becomes a bit difficult to truly understand just how or even if one, a human being, can fathom the mind and nature of the divine? Yet this story has and must have a meaning for each person who hears it. The simple fact that Jesus invites himself into the life of the hated tax collector, into the life of a known sinner, into the life of a child of Abraham, into the life

of a believer should certainly proclaim that Jesus is willing to enter into every single life no matter what kind of person it may be, and enter into it in a very intimate way. And this goes for all time, not just when Jesus was on earth. What all this means is that in trying to realize this one can then begin to realize the present reality of one's life as possibly being as open to the work of Christ as it was on that day Christ met Zacchaeus in Jericho. This includes the fact that it is "my life" into which Jesus is inviting himself. This of course takes faith, but why should one then discount their faith as if it were too weak or too small? Christ does not take that into consideration for he comes no matter how firm, how deep or how weak or faint it may be. If one simply whispers that they don't understand, he still will come knowing that his power will ultimately overcome our weakness or weaknesses for we all have more than one!

Perhaps the real problem for almost everyone is that one is never sure if one really and honestly wants to encounter the lord, Jesus. One will always readily say yes, but deep down is the other question, what will it cost me! And money is not the price. Does one really want to change? Is one basically happy with the status quo and does not want to change it in any way? These may be difficult questions but they are real and are honest. Accept this and then add to it the fact that one fears any change but while this is natural, why does one almost always think it will be for the worse? All this is based on preconceived ideas, most of which are totally wrong. Following Christ does not mean losing out on good times and simple fun. Rather it means becoming more and more what God created one to be and that means that we become totally ourselves with no fears and unbelievable confidence. This is the destiny that God planned for all of his human creations from the very beginning.

The question then is, just how does one overcome all these fears, these inner demons hiding within the recesses of our unconscious self. This is not some sort of psychological quiz or test but rather taking a good look at one's self and admitting to one's self their fears, their possible misunderstandings, their deep seated longing for real inner peace. A visit to a psychiatrist is definitely not the answer, for this is not some sort of hidden disorder or disease. It is simply looking at one's humanity and then hopefully being able to admit to one's self the hidden weaknesses that are there, not just in one but in all human beings. The answer to this can be found only in prayer.

Prayer is so misunderstood. One thinks of books of prayer, about prayer, how to pray, etc, etc. Nonsense! Prayer is just a simple name for communication with God! Talking with God. So just open up with God and in your heart talk openly and honestly with him, with no presumptions or pre-judgments. Try it and then you will know exactly what it is all about and be surprised how simple and how healing it in fact is. Then sit back and enjoy the open relationship you will find with the Lord and experience the joy of your faith.

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