



November 3, 2013

Thirty-first Sunday Ordinary Time

...Jesus looked up and said to him "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for I must stay at your house." Luke 19:5

Dear Friends;

Sometimes, the only exercise some people get is "jumping to conclusions." This is as true today as it was in the time of Jesus.

The name "Zacchaeus" means "clean," "pure" or "innocent." But often preachers do not present him as innocent. Like many of Zacchaeus' contemporaries they assume that he is guilty. His name is a key to understanding the story.

Zacchaeus was a toll collector for the Roman occupiers. As a toll collector Zacchaeus would have bid for the right to collect the tolls. When the Roman government accepted the bid, Zacchaeus would pay in full the toll for his region. Then through his agents Zacchaeus would recover the cost by collecting the tolls. If possible he would make a profit. Most toll takers did not make a profit.

Zacchaeus was identified as "rich" because he had people who worked for him. "Rich" could also mean "greedy" if someone was seen to have gained wealth at the expense of others. This certainly could have been the temptation of someone collecting the tolls. Squeeze as much as you can out of the people. So we must ask was Zacchaeus merely recouping the toll or extorting people. The crowd seems to assume the latter. But is that true?

It could be that Zacchaeus is really an honest man who is only collecting the toll trying to make a living. He may be condemned merely because his job forces him to deal with the gentiles. Or possibly by the time Jesus is coming through town he is a changed man. The fact that he is willing to forego his dignity to climb a tree in order to see Jesus tells us something about his character.

When Jesus invites himself to the house of Zacchaeus the Pharisees grumble that Jesus "is going to the house of a sinner." But Zacchaeus defends himself. In the Greek Zacchaeus uses the present tense that describes ongoing and customary practice. "I (regularly) give half of what I have to the poor." Secondly, he says "if I have cheated." In other words if I have mistakenly cheated then he will remedy that. Jewish law required restoration of the object plus 20 percent interest (or one fifth). Roman law required 400 percent (fourfold) of convicted criminals. Zacchaeus is willing to meet the stricter terms of Roman law.

For Jesus in this Gospel of Luke righteousness is expressed in care for the poor and acting justly. Even though others do not see, Jesus sees the righteousness of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is an example of someone who though others maligned is secure in his own self-knowledge. And Jesus affirms this calling him "a true son of Abraham."

This story has several things to teach us. One is we need to be careful about judging and labeling people. Often we do not see into the heart. Could you imagine how our public conversations with each other and in government would be if we could see the good in the other? Our labels do not exhaust the identity of the other. Can we ignore the judgments of the talking heads on TV, and others in the blogosphere to get to know someone for ourselves?

We can learn from Jesus and Zacchaeus to be secure in our self-knowledge and truth. Let us develop the self-esteem to resist and survive the critical comments of others. What is important is not what others think but what God thinks. Pray for the Strength of the Spirit so we too can "go out on a limb" to dine with Jesus in the faces of the poor, the lonely, the sick and sinner.

Peace,

Fr. Ron

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