

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 31st SUNDAY -C-

Wisdom 11: 22-12:2 Psalm 145 2 Thessalonians 1: 11-22 Luke 19: 1-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

What’s in a name? Naming someone, even using nicknames, doesn’t automatically make them something they are not. So, we call a person “Champ,” but they may excel in no sport; “Hope” might be a depressed or negative woman; “Charity” may be selfish; “Ernest” (sounds like earnest) may be insincere, and “Christian” may not be a particularly virtuous person. Unless something dramatic happens in these people’s lives, they may never live up to the promise of their names. That’s a clue to today’s gospel.

Zacchaeus. Before he had the significant encounter with Jesus described in today’s gospel, he didn’t reflect the meaning of his name. Zacchaeus means “the righteous one.” He certainly wasn’t considered righteous in the eyes of other Jews. As a “chief tax collector” he was quite the opposite. He is described as a wealthy man. Reflect on how he earned all his wealth. Tax collectors paid the Romans for the license to collect taxes in a certain town or area. Since they were from the same population, they would know the financial status of those from whom they collected taxes. Once tax collectors got permission to collect taxes, they would pay the amount the Romans had levied and then collect the taxes. A chief tax collector would have hired henchmen for the task. The system was rife with opportunities for corruption since anything collected over the levied amount would go to the tax collector. These tax collectors were considered leeches, sucking the blood from the already over-stressed and burdened population. Since Zacchaeus was rich, we can presume he had made more than his fair share off the backs of his poor neighbors.

That’s the starting point for this story. Zacchaeus’ name must have sounded ironic to his Jewish neighbors, for he certainly wasn’t pure or righteous as his name implied. Before the story is over however, Jesus will affirm Zacchaeus’ identity as a “descendent of Abraham.” The locals must have been outraged by Jesus’ calling him by that term! If Zacchaeus were a true child or descendent of Abraham, they would have reasoned, he would have been compassionate to his fellow Jews and not entered into contract to take taxes from them to give to the murderous

occupying Romans—nor to keep more than his fair share for himself. When the story ends we note a big change in Zacchaeus; he is a completely different person from the one we meet at the beginning, for after his encounter with Christ, Zacchaeus really does become a true Israelite---he gives half his possessions to the poor and returns more than he has taken from those he has extorted. He really is a “descendent of Abraham.”

The story doesn't tell what preceded Zacchaeus' going out to see Jesus. We don't know if he was desperately wanting to change his life. Was he wearied by his dishonesties, betrayals and the scorn of his community? Did his family suffer rejections because of Zacchaeus' tax collecting business? If he had small children, did the neighbors forbid their own children from playing with them? Was Zacchaeus a man ready for a big change in his life? Maybe---but we aren't explicitly told anything about a prior change of heart or remorse.

Or was he merely curious, and so his “seeking to see who Jesus was,” just an attempt to see someone with a big reputation? Did he hope to get an opportunity to see Jesus do something spectacular—cure another leper, open the eyes of a blind person, or feed all the hungry in the town? We don't know. What we know is what Luke wants to tell us. Zacchaeus' pre-dispositions aren't given; we know he is a tax collector, and they were often grouped with prostitutes as the big sinners by their contemporaries. They were the public sinners; everyone knew about their disreputable deeds. “Tax collectors and sinners” were also the people Jesus ate with and for that he was severely criticized by the religious elite, the pure Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus doesn't look like he is about to change his ways, for once again he plans to eat with a tax collector, indeed he is anxious to do so. He tells Zacchaeus that he is to hurry down so Jesus can eat in his house, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.”

Why “must” Jesus stay in Zacchaeus' house? Well, the first reading from Wisdom gives a clue: our God, the all-powerful Creator (before whom “the whole universe is as a grain from a balance....”), is personally concerned about each of us. This concern is not like a general interest over God's handiwork; rather God is personally involved in the world God has made. In fact, God is passionate about us, a “lover of souls.” (“O Lord, and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things.”) So, when Jesus walked through Jericho that day, he was simply doing what God does and expressing what God feels for us. Jesus manifested

God's love for what God had made and when even one creature is lost, God goes out of God's way to bring that one back. Jesus puts it this way, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

How does the all-powerful Creator manifest great power?—by being merciful. That's not how our world shows power; but God isn't governed by how we expect power to be shown. The Wisdom and gospel readings show a clear link: if God's imperishable spirit is in all living things," then that spirit is even in the sinner Zacchaeus and Jesus is out to show how God wants to deal with sinners—by showing them mercy. God has a loving eye fixed on Zacchaeus, the work of God's hands, and God does not want to lose him.

I would be careful not to make Zacchaeus in the tree seem like a buffoon, a silly man, doing a ridiculous thing and the object of ridicule from the on-lookers. This might lessen the import of the serious thing he does. Instead, Zacchaeus, a sinner who has made his fortunes off the backs of the poor, has been "found" by Jesus and so he welcomes Jesus into his entire life—his home. Jesus, for his part, is in a hurry to reach out to Zacchaeus, there is no time to waste, "today," Jesus says, "I must stay at your house."

So, who's the host and who's the guest in today's story? While it might be Zacchaeus' house, it is Jesus who does the inviting. He invites Zacchaeus to join him as a guest in Zacchaeus' own house! While we may have built the church building in which we are worshiping, set the worship space and are about to bring our bread and wine to the table, let's not forget that we are simply the guests at a meal set by a very hospitable God who, in Jesus, has come out looking for us to invite us in. For that we celebrate this feast of thanks.

What will happen when we leave here today? Will we too be more fully accepting of those closest to us? Will we search out and find the ones our world does not extend a welcome to; who might these be in our community and how can we welcome them?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Larry Hollar, ed. **HUNGER FOR THE WORD: LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS ON FOOD AND JUSTICE, YEAR A.** (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) ISBN

0-8146-2920-2, paper, \$19.95.

If you are interested in suggestions for how to incorporate justice themes into your lectionary-based preaching, this book will help. Pastoral and theologically trained men and women, grounded in the anti-hunger movement through Bread for the World, share thoughts and stories for each of the Sundays in the A cycle of readings. Each reflection also includes suggestions for “children’s time” and hymn selection.

QUOTABLE

Despite all the talk about a vocation shortage, there is no such thing in the Catholic church.... The shortfall in the number of candidates for the priesthood, the consecrated life and other forms of Christian witness and service would quickly disappear if many more Catholics, and ideally all, made it a practice to discern, accept and live out their unique, irreplaceable callings from God—their personal vocations.

—Russell Shaw, in *AMERICA*, March 29, 2004.

JUSTICE NOTES

The coming elections provide important opportunities to bring together our principles, experience, and community in effective public witness. We hope parishes, dioceses, schools, colleges, and other Catholic institutions will encourage active participation through non-partisan voter registration and education efforts, as well as through ongoing legislative networks and advocacy programs.¹⁵ As Catholics we need to share our values, raise our voices, and use our votes to shape a society that protects human life, promotes family life, pursues social justice, and practices solidarity. These efforts can strengthen our nation and renew our Church.

-----“Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility”---US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see

you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Shawn D. Bonnett #0037215 (On death row since 9/27/96)
- James F. Davis #0510234 (10/2/96)
- Melvin L. White #0434355 (10/15/96)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606