

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:

When real estate people talk about the factors that make a house attractive to prospective buyers they will say that there are three: “location, location, location.” That’s also what made Zacchaeus into a wealthy man—location. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in Jericho, a city that was on a primary trade route. It was a rich city because of its location. That meant lots of taxes for the Romans and a very good living for tax collectors, especially the chief tax collector. The city was also a popular vacation spot for the wealthy. Herod himself had built a palace with vast gardens and a theater there. In Palestine’s barren surroundings, Jericho was an oasis of fruit trees and greenery. The rich had quite the life there, and Zacchaeus was one of them—to the resentment and hatred of subservient Jews who were burdened with the unreasonable taxes imposed by the Romans and collected by the tax collectors. “Location, location, location.” Jericho was the location where Zacchaeus made his fortune.

We are coming to the end of our liturgical year, and Luke has been our focus gospel these Sundays. In the course of this year, in Luke, we have heard Jesus’ criticism of the wealthy and his warnings that the rich will have a hard time entering the kingdom of God. In fact, in the previous chapter Jesus had just advised the rich ruler, “How hard it will be for the rich to go into the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich person to enter the kingdom (18: 24-25).

Zacchaeus picked a good location to see and be seen by Jesus—he climbed a sycamore tree. We are used to hearing this story, but let’s not overlook its unusual elements, for it is when Jesus breaks the expected pattern that the gospel shows itself. In the light of the negative things Jesus had been saying about riches and since Zacchaeus was a dishonest and disloyal Jew, we would have expected that if Jesus were to single out Zacchaeus, it would have been to criticize him and use him as an example of a sinner who needed to repent. Zacchaeus should have been warned about his impending doom and God’s displeasure with him.

Jesus would have also preached against the injustice of gaining riches off the backs of the poor. That's what we would have expected—certainly that's what the crowd expected since, most likely, they were among Zacchaeus' victims. But that is not what Jesus did. He broke the pattern of what we humans expected and revealed God's accustomed ways of acting—Jesus offered God's grace to Zacchaeus, as he does to us today.

There certainly were plenty of deserving and respected people among those who lined Jesus' route that day. We would have been among them good, decent, hardworking and needy people trying to get a glimpse of a dynamic religious leader upon whom so many desperate had hung their hopes. Why didn't Jesus pick out one of them and go to the home of a respectable and religious person? Why Zacchaeus? Had we been there that day and heard the exchange between Jesus and Zacchaeus wouldn't we be among the grumblers? What had Zacchaeus done, besides finding a good spot to catch sight of Jesus, to earn Jesus' noticing him and inviting himself to the tax collector's home? Nothing. Remember this is a story of grace and we don't earn grace. Grace is offered to us and after we get over the shock and surprise, we grab it firmly with both hands and clutch it to ourselves as we receive it with joy—just the way Zacchaeus did.

Joy has been a theme in Luke. We are coming to the end of his gospel as we get ready to close out the liturgical year, but joy has been with us since the beginning of Luke. It comes when God acts and people notice it, receive it and respond to it in their lives. Remember the joy of the shepherds when the angels announced Jesus' birth to them (2: 10); or the joy that Jesus says comes to those who "hear the word and receive it" (8:13). Later in this gospel, the resurrected Jesus will appear to the eleven and Luke will tell us they were "still incredulous for sheer joy and wonder" (24:41). Joy is what happens when people hear the good news. That's the joy Zacchaeus had the day Jesus invited himself to dinner at the chief tax collector's home. This is not a religion of strictures and bad news we preach—it is about God's extension of grace to those who have done nothing to deserve it.

We are invited to see God's mercy at work. Zacchaeus had committed a lot of offenses to make himself worthless in the eyes of those who had gathered to catch a glimpse of Jesus. The story immediately preceding this one tells of Jesus' giving physical sight to a blind man who says to Jesus, "Lord, I want to see" (18: 35-43). The cure takes place on the outskirts of Jericho. Now, in Jericho, another kind of

sight is offered to Zacchaeus, the onlookers and us. Jesus seems to have been looking specifically for Zacchaeus, because he was lost. Jesus announces the grace God is offering the outcast, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.”

The crowd is shocked, not by Zacchaeus’ bizarre behavior and his making a fool of himself, by perching in a tree. Rather, they are more incredulous toward Jesus whom they think should have known better. How could this religious leader go to the home of a sinner? We have a replay here of last Sunday’s self-righteous Pharisee who would never think himself a sinner and hence would have no need of the one who was out seeking and saving the lost.

But Zacchaeus gets the point, he accepts the grace Jesus offered him. He will have Jesus at his table in his home and that good news transforms him. Jesus doesn’t put any demands on him at this point, but Zacchaeus spontaneously offers to give half his possessions to the poor and to repay anyone he has extorted “four times over.” Grace has changed Zacchaeus’ life. He can now see—but the crowd remains blind to what God is offering all of us through Jesus. Zacchaeus’ life style gave him and his family many comforts and luxuries. But he was also a prisoner who needed to be set free, and Jesus’ word did just that for him. Now he could break old patterns and begin a new life. Now he could take Jesus home with him where, not only he, but his whole family would be changed by his new life. We can’t box someone in. Anyone can change because God never gives up on us, but is always out looking for us, calling us by name and wanting to make a home with us.

Luke uses some images in today’s story that can speak to us. Zacchaeus is described as being “short of stature.” There may be parts of our lives that are stunted, haven’t grown to full stature; we may be short on generosity; small in compassion; miserly in forgiveness. Coming to church today is like climbing a tree, hoping with Zacchaeus and one another, to see Jesus. Hearing God’s Word helps us to see ourselves better and to hear Jesus’s desire to stay with us. Hearing Jesus’ invitation helps us change and become the joyful people who have heard the Good News and have embraced it.

We hope, in other words, that we may not just get a glimpse of Jesus, but that we will really see him. What we hope will happen here at church, this “tree” we have come to and climbed, is that Jesus will look at us, call us by name and invite us to a

closer intimacy with him. It's what Zacchaeus and his family couldn't help but experience when they sat down at table in their home with the Lord.

Being a Christian isn't a private affair. We can't stay in the tree and just savor Jesus' words and company. We can't hide our faith in church, this place of encounter with the Lord. Zacchaeus took Jesus home with him and his family were the first beneficiaries of this grace-filled meeting with Jesus. Zacchaeus wasn't supposed to become a monk, with the tree as his retreat. He was a family man and a citizen of the world where he was to live and see others with new sight. There, out in the world, he was also to follow through on his resolve, "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."

The real estate agents have it right, it is all about "location, location, location." Zacchaeus' story shows us that the first important location for us is our meeting with Christ. There he addresses us personally and offers us grace. There we set about to make necessary changes in our lives. But we don't stay in that place. We go to the other locations in our lives, now changed by grace, filled with joy and resolved to live our renewed lives in whatever location we find ourselves—home, work, school, indeed —the whole world.

QUOTABLE

If we simply repeat the formulas of the past, our words may have the character of doctrine and dogma, but they will not have the character of good news. We may be preaching perfectly orthodox doctrine, but it is not the gospel for us today. We must take the idea of good news seriously. If our message does not take the form of good news, it is simply not the Christian gospel."

----Albert Nolan, O.P.

JUSTICE NOTES

**"Brothers and sisters: We always pray for you, that our God will powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith.
(2Thessalonians 2:16)**

We are called to encourage and strengthen each other "in every effort of faith" to help build up the Kingdom of God for all, but especially for those who are poor and powerless.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development enables and empowers others to “bring to fulfillment every good purpose” as we hear in today's second reading. For more than 30 years this annual collection has created hope and life both locally and nationally. **It is the Catholic Church’s national anti-poverty program**

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) assists people in their struggle to solve problems that stand in the way of living a life of dignity. It addresses poverty in the United States and works to break the cycle of poverty. Funds are distributed through a series of grants to groups who take on themselves the responsibility to change the things which keep them in poverty. **It is a "hand up, not a hand out". It is a “coming to fulfillment”.**

Did you know?

“There is a line stretched across America—the poverty line. One in eight Americans hangs below it. Life at the poverty line leaves nearly 40 million Americans hanging on for dear life—hanging on to feed their families and to keep a roof over their heads.” The Catholic Campaign for Human Development supports self-help projects of people working together to break the cycle of poverty.

1. CCHD has created a marvelous Web site. Before deciding on your contribution to the CCHD. Read the “facts”, take the “quiz”.

What can I do?

Give generously next weekend to the collection for the Campaign for Human Development. It is our chance to participate in God's work of "bringing every good purpose to fulfillment".

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Here’s a note from someone who started writing to one of the inmates listed on this page:

I wanted to share a story with you about what happened when I sent off some post cards to death row inmates a year ago. One of the men dropped me a note thanking me for writing, so I replied, and it was the beginning of a correspondence that has been a gift to both of us. Just this week, he was returned to general death row population after 9+ years on look-down and he attributes some of his positive changes to the support and encouragement that our written conversation has

offered. Certainly, there are multiple pieces to the puzzle that is our life and every person and experience adds something to the finished picture. I feel very privileged to have been able to be a part of this man's journey towards healing. Whether or not there is acknowledgment of the message, it seems pretty obvious that sending postcards is something that needs to be continued. We become who we are in relationship to each other, and it is very difficult to discover the many positive aspects of ourselves in isolation. Continue to encourage people to reach out to these men, reminding them that they do have an inherently good self and reminding them that there is always the opportunity to become more of what God has intended for them.

---Mary Therese Lemanek Allen park, mi

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

- Jeffrey Neal #0113234 (On death row since 9/26/03)
- Linwood Earl Forte #0133102 910/8/03)
- Scott D. Allen #0005091 (11/18/03)

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