



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-November 3rd 2019

***Readings: Wisdom 11: 22- 12: 2, Psalm 144, 2 Thessalonians 1: 11-2: 2,
Luke 19: 1-10***

The setting: Jericho

One famous Biblical commentator described ancient Jericho thus: A great and immensely prosperous city that commanded the approach to Jerusalem and the access to the lands East of the Jordan. A city of date palm forests, balsam groves and roses. The Jewish historian, Josephus, described it as ‘a divine region’, ‘the fattest in Palestine’. To be the concessionary tax farmer for such a region was to have hit the jackpot – a licence to print money.

The vantage point: The sycamore tree

As a boy I used to wonder why anyone would want to secrete themselves in one of those ubiquitous weeds that drops sap everywhere. For gardeners you would want to know that the Greek word ‘sycamore’ refers not to one of these self- seeded blighters but rather to the ‘Fig-Mulberry’ – a shade giving, low spreading, high fruiting beauty that has been cultivated by Man since ancient times.

The motive:

We are introduced to Zaccheus – a man grown wealthy on the fruits of other men’s labour, a servant of the hated occupying power, a social outcast for all his largesse. He is horizontally challenged and needs to

climb the tree if he is to get a view of the travelling circus that surrounds Jesus and a glimpse of the Man Himself. He might also have been wise to get himself out of the way of any pushing and shoving and sharp elbows that may have awaited him from any of the crowd who recognised the hated traitor to his people.

We cannot know the full depths of his heart or his dilemma. Had he known that Jesus had actually called Matthew, a tax collector, to be among his trusty band? Was he curious as to whether this coming kingdom could include a treacherous parasite like him?

Was his wealth no longer any compensation for his ostracism and isolation?

Was he a rich but lonely and empty man?

One thing we can be sure of is that he is about the last person the citizens of Jericho would have thought worthy of Jesus' attention – and that thought would have been shared by Zaccheus.

He just knows that, in all the surging conflicts of his heart and mind, he needs to get to see Jesus.

To his astonishment, and the crowd's, Jesus not only singles him out but invites Himself to dinner at the fat cat's mansion. (This is neither the first nor last lapse in taste Our Lord demonstrates in the company that He keeps – and I, for one, am grateful.) The Gospeller notes the wholehearted disapproval of Jesus' action. 'They ALL complained'.

Jesus' action, if you judge this outing to be like a royal visit, is unreasonable and unjust. But Jesus' royal visits are not simply to glad-hand the worthy. Their primary purpose is SALVATION.

Let us look at what happens next.

Confronted with Jesus, taking Him home, Zaccheus confesses his sins. All the wealth, the corruption, the graft, the fiddling, the source of his alienation from his people and community is poured out at the feet of Jesus. He wants to begin again. He wants to be a good man. This shackling of his heart by unseemly wealth is to be broken by a

commitment to the poor. Half of what he has goes to charity. For his fraudulent activities he will pay back fourfold. This is spectacular. The LAW required double restitution of robberies BUT..if confessed, then only the original amount plus 20 per cent – a sort of Vice Additional Tax. So Zaccheus' pledge is way beyond what is required by the Law but rather in tune with the heart of God.

Jesus' response to the penitent is glorious:

'Today Salvation has come to this house.' –

Sole purpose of visit. Sole purpose of the Incarnation. Sole purpose of the ministry. Sole purpose of the Mission. Sole purpose of the Calvary. Sole purpose of the Harrowing of Hell and the Resurrection. Sole purpose of the Church – that Salvation may come to the house of the lost. The house of fallen Man. To you and to me.

The lost: That is such a good well- chosen word. For the lost are not yet doomed or damned – that is the final judgement and that is God's alone. The lost are people in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, displaced, disordered, disappointed, dysfunctional, disabled by a narrow heart – for all their seeming success, lost, lonely and disaffected – heirs of the consequence of sin.

In Zaccheus we see the insoluble puzzle solved. He wants to see Jesus.

The encounter is life changing. He is, overwhelmed by the generosity of the Lord's Presence and concern, driven joyfully to confession and reparation, liberated by the love of God, host of the Most High at the banquet of Reconciliation.

We recognise the pattern. Ensnared in our own follies, we know, in all the turmoil of our hearts and minds, that we need to see Jesus. We need, with Zaccheus, come down, make our confession and welcome the Lord into our hearts and homes and dare to dine with Him at the Feast of Salvation. There is no need to be stuck up that gum tree.