



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-October 30th 2022

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

On February 24th 1969 Johnny Cash recorded one of his most famous songs at San Quentin State Prison, California. It was the story of a young baby abandoned by his father who, before he left, gave him the name of 'SUE'. Nowadays, I guess, nobody would bat an eyelid at such counter-factual appellations but in 1969 in the testosterone fuelled hothouse of a male prison, it was explosive. The gist of the song is the rough tough life of the child and then man who had to fight this way through the world because of his risible girl's name. This, it turns out, was the wretched father's intention – to ensure that his deserted son grew up hard as nails in reaction to his malevolent mis-labelling. Well I thought of the San Quentin crew of all those years ago when I opened the page on Zaccheus. No, Zaccheus is not the Hebrew for Sue (or Sally or Samantha) but it is the Hebrew for 'PURE'. I want the men to imagine, for a moment, the burden of going school each day with a name like 'PURE'. Exactly. I remember we had guy in my class whose parents had called him 'Christian'. He worked night and day to disown that assertion of goodness.

Zaccheus could not have done more to shake off the embarrassment of his birth name. He had grown up to side with the occupying power of Rome, become the most hated object of all, a tax farmer, battered upon his own people, dealt corruptly with his kin and made his fortune from oppression and corruption. PURE he was not. His alienation from his birth name, from his people, from his Faith, from the intentions of his parents when they brought him to give thanks and become a Son of the Covenant could not have been more complete. He was filthy rich –but a disgrace to the family. A runaway success but a social outcast. Top of his tree but a ‘Billy no-mates’. Into the maelstrom of this deeply conflicted person rides Jesus. Zaccheus is both literally and metaphorically ‘up the proverbial gum tree’. The ‘PURE’ who has become the IMPURE has a deep longing to see what PURITY actually looks like. To recapture, for a fleeting moment, the intention of his parents, to see what might have been in his own life. Like the rest of the crowd he will have heard much and been intrigued. He might even have heard of the deeply shocking conversion of his fellow tax collector, Matthew and the inevitable scandal of such a radical action. Was Zaccheus filled with hope? Was he teetering on the brink? Had he had enough of the life of a gold-plated outcast? We do not know. What we do know is that Jesus knew him in the way that only God could. What we do know is that, unlike the blind, the lepers, the crippled whom Jesus healed, there was nothing visibly wrong with this man. His sickness was in his soul and he was just as desperate for healing as any of the others. Jesus could see beyond the exterior success and riches and position to the lonely, sinner trapped in impurity and enslaved to riches and corruption. In our evangelism we need to be able to discern the reality behind the social front of those to whom we minister. Behind the richest door can lie the loneliest heart. When Jesus commands Zaccheus to get down from the tree and invites

himself to dinner, the social and religious shock waves are seismic. Indeed the very idea of a Rabbi going to dine with such an obviously 'unclean' person is unthinkable. It compromises the ritual purity of the Rabbi himself. So it is no small beer. But it is critical to Zaccheus 'coming clean'. Sometimes we need to invite ourselves into the most unlikely places with Jesus in order to effect His will and ensure the encounter with the heart of fallen Man. It is what we do at the Last Supper of the Mass when we invite Jesus to our humble table and it becomes the altar of sacrifice where all things must be offered back to Him for His use and we place ourselves at His disposal. Zaccheus, rich, lonely, unloved, separated from God, up a gum tree might be a metaphor for the remnant of our once Christian civilisation. Zaccheus' repentance, reconciliation and restitution are the key to his restoration as Son of the Covenant. Only thus can he reclaim the name he has lost. Only then can he encounter salvation. It is no different for us. It is no different for those lands which once rejoiced in the name of Christendom. If they (and we) are to reclaim our original name and the purpose for which we were created we are to get down humbly from the tree of our pride – we are not to be mere fascinated but detached observers of Christ but participants in His ministry. And, as He commands, to make Him welcome at our table and on the altar of our hearts as we celebrate the eternal banquet of Salvation.