

ZACCHAEUS MEETS JESUS: 31ST SUNDAY C

We find ourselves in the city of Jericho, an oasis city in the Jordan valley, known as the 'City of Palms'. We smell its famous balsam trees which perfume the air for miles around. We gaze on its equally famous rose gardens which attract so many visitors. In the middle of all this beauty there occurs that deeply significant meeting between Jesus and a little man called Zacchaeus.

Now Zacchaeus is a tax collector, indeed a chief tax collector, for the occupying foreign power, the Romans. For that very reason he is despised by his fellow Jews. For making so much money at their expense through cheating and swindling them, he is loathed and hated like no other person in town. Although Zacchaeus is now a wealthy man, he is not a happy one. Lately he has become quite fed up with being hated and despised by everyone, and with feeling so lonely and lost. Lately he has started searching for some turn-around in his life, some way to change his occupation and his life-style.

When one day he hears the news that Jesus of Nazareth is heading his way, he knows that he simply has to meet this Jesus - to get the comfort and hope, the love and forgiveness, the brand new start which he so desperately needs.

But getting to meet Jesus is anything but easy. First there is the risk of going into that crowd, many of whom will surely take their chance to jostle, push and even kick him. When he does join the crowd he finds he cannot see over the tall people hemming him in on every side. So he gets a brain-wave. He races ahead and climbs a tree, with short trunk and wide branches, just right for a short, overweight person like him to look out for Jesus.

He hasn't long to wait. To his surprise, Jesus looks up from under the tree, smiles and says with a touch of humour and presumption: 'Zacchaeus, get down. Hurry up. I've got to stay at your house today.' Zacchaeus is bubbling with joy and excitement as he walks his guest to his own home, and welcomes him at the door: 'It's just so marvellous to meet you', Zacchaeus keeps saying over and over again, 'I can't believe my luck.'

Meanwhile the crowd that would willingly strangle Zacchaeus if only they could get their hands on him, cannot believe what they are seeing: 'This Jesus,' they complain, 'has gone to stay at a sinner's house.' Their cutting words, however, are a moment of truth for Zacchaeus, There and then, in the presence of Jesus, who has been so friendly, so accepting, so understanding, so ready to forgive, Zacchaeus stands his ground: 'Look, sir, he says, 'I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times the amount.' His turn-around, his change of heart, his conversion, could hardly be more spontaneous, more sincere, or more complete. Jesus acknowledges this when he replies: 'I have come to seek out and save what was lost. Today salvation has come to this house.'

Brothers and Sisters! There is just so much enlightenment and comfort for you and me too in this touching incident. We see Jesus for what he was and still is, 'the friend of sinners', and therefore our friend. Our understanding, compassionate, and forgiving friend! Our friend who is there when others fail or desert us! The one who is present when others are absent! The one who helps and heals when others only criticize and condemn! The one who never gives

up on us, never despairs of us! The one who waits patiently for us to change our lives, and who allows us time to do so! The one, in short, who loves us with an everlasting love, an everlasting forgiving love, an everlasting healing love, and an everlasting transforming love! The one whom we meet today in our holy communion with him and one another!

Just like Zacchaeus, then, let us welcome this great person Jesus, into our lives and into our house, knowing and trusting what a difference he will make, as he brings to you and me his precious gift of salvation!

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