



Homily for 11/03/2019

31st Sun. Ordinary Time, C

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Seek the Lord

The Christian life is about looking for Jesus and searching for Him with all our zeal. First and foremost, He is found in the interior of our hearts. There He has made us into His temple where He dwells. We are especially recommended by our Mother the Church to have a deep and rich interior life because we are called to be in communion with God. That interior space, commonly called the heart, is where our Lord not only speaks to us, but also waits for us and chooses to dwell and make His home. This is why we are earnestly reminded to pray always! Go into the place God has prepared for you and find the Lord there. This is the upper room where God desires to commune with you.

The Lord also speaks to us through Divine Revelation. Especially in the Sacred Scriptures we hear the voice of the Lord speaking to our hearts, if we have ears to hear Him. That is why reading from the Sacred Scriptures is piously recommended to the faithful. We should make it a point to do so regularly. People wonder why the Lord is so quiet or remains silent when evil abounds and yet they never stop and listen to the constant hum of His love song to us that has been given to us throughout the ages. To hear this love song requires tuning our ears to hear.

In the Scriptures there are many levels of meaning. We of course immediately see the literal meaning especially in a Gospel like today that is a narrative story of an encounter Jesus had in the town of Jericho. But there is also a deeper spiritual meaning. This is usually the frequency of the love song the Lord is singing to us.

When we look at the Gospel as having a spiritual meaning, we can better understand the matters of our own interior life. In Today's Gospel this spiritual meaning is very fruitful if we are attentive.

Zacchaeus is the name of the chief tax collector of the town of Jericho. This is a big deal. Tax collectors were known as thieves and extortioners - breaking the commandment, "Thou shalt not steal." They were also seen as collaborators with the oppressive Roman occupiers and traitors to the Jewish people. And Zacchaeus was the chief of among them. But a hint as to the spiritual meaning of this passage is found already in Zacchaeus' name. His name derives from the Hebrew Zakkai, which means "innocent". Zacchaeus, bearing the name of 'Innocent' is the least innocent of all people. He is a hypocrite. Aren't we all! When it comes down to it, we are people marked with the name of Christ, the Just Man, as Christians, and yet we live so often times in opposition to this reality because of our injustices, our sins. The first of many lessons. The second follows.

Despite his name, Zacchaeus is not under any presumption that he is actually innocent. This is the second spiritual notion we should take heed of - humility. His actions are very notable. The Scriptures say that because of his small stature he couldn't see Jesus in the crowd, so he climbed a sycamore tree to see Him. This is notable for two reasons. First it indicated that he really wanted to see Jesus. He went out of his way to see Him. This was no passing fancy or curiosity. It was a sincere desire followed by audacious action. How desirous are we of seeking out Jesus? Do we go to where He can be found, namely the interior of our souls in prayer, or do we just sit around idle and expect that He will simply pass by us? Second, Zacchaeus' actions must have been a very humbling gesture too. I'm sure climbing trees in Jesus' time was a child's thing or seen as beneath the station of the upper crust, just as it is in our own day. When was the last time you saw a businessman or a politician climb a tree? So, his gesture was radical, but it was also humbling. I'm sure there were a few sneers and snickers. Are we willing to climb the tree of embarrassment, ridicule, and humility in order to see Jesus? The devil is always trying to convince us that our time could be spent better than wasted in prayer. He taunts us with an activism that is opposed to contemplation of the most important thing: being at the feet of Jesus and soaking up His presence. Are we willing to climb the tree of prayer with Zacchaeus?



But then comes this great moment when Jesus looks up at him and calls out to him. He bids him to come down quickly and then invites himself to dinner. Can you imagine? With everyone laughing at him and he being the most despised figure in town, he has just gotten an invitation to host not just some famous celebrity, but God Himself in the Flesh! Do we realize that when we spend time in prayer, God looks at us also and He enters into our inner life. Seek and you shall find! The Lord desires to come in and eat and drink with you!

Now, this is significant. To eat with someone is to enter into communion with them. We eat often with our friends. The people we eat most with are family. Jesus wants to be the friend of your soul. He wants to adopt you into the family of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How oblivious we are to this great and awesome reality when we fail to pray! It's like passing up dinner with every person we've ever esteemed. Dining with presidents, royalty, or celebrities doesn't hold a candle to the ultimate gift of communing with God, and yet how often do we pray? And yet how often do we complain that God seems far off or oblivious to our problems?

The reason becomes plain to us when we hear what happens next. The people murmured, "He's gone to be the guest of a sinner." And they would be justified in their murmuring if he simply continued in his evil ways while hosting the Lord God almighty. The same would be for us. We insist that God help us, but we are not willing to change. But notice what Zacchaeus does: he repents. And he doesn't simply use words. He pledges half his fortune and reparation four times over for those whom he has defrauded. He put his treasure where his heart was. He put his treasure in Jesus, and the poor and mistreated of this world belong to Jesus. Where is our treasure? With whom has it been bound up? It is not simply for fiscal reasons that we have been conducting our Annual Stewardship Appeal. There is an intense and primary spiritual reason. We have to dislodge the usurper and squatter of greed and envy in our souls and welcome the true master of the house, Jesus, to take up His proper place. This is what repentance means. And to this repentance Jesus declares that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house. Salvation will come to our house too if we cast off the deeds of darkness and let the King of Light enter the home of our heart.

St. Augustine famously commented on this very passage when he said, "Say what you like, but for our part, let us climb the sycamore tree and see Jesus. The reason you cannot see Jesus is that you are ashamed to climb the sycamore tree. Let Zacchaeus grasp the sycamore tree, and let the humble person climb the cross. That is little enough, merely to climb it. We must not be ashamed of the cross of Christ, but we must fix it on our forehead, where the seat of shame is. Above, where all our blushes show, is the place we must firmly fix that for which we should never blush." (Augustine, Sermon 174.3; trans. in A. Just, Jr., Luke, 290-91)

So this Sunday I invite you to tune into the Lord's song for all His creatures. This is the love song of the lover of souls: Do not be afraid to climb the tree of prayer and let me, Your God, into the inner life of your soul that you may experience My salvation today.