31st Sunday of Ordinary Time C “Reflections on Zacchaeus”

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I love that first line from the Book of Wisdom today, “Before the LORD the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth.” That isn’t very reassuring, is it? This can have a way of making us, as well as the matters that are important to us, seem rather small. However, the Book of Wisdom does give us perspective and an important glimpse into God’s point of view, I suppose. The next sentence however is much more promising when the author continues his prayer to God by saying, “But you [O God] have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people’s sins that they may repent.” This should make us feel a little better. God is patient with us. God overlooks our sins in the hopes that we will have a conversion of heart.

Zacchaeus was used to being overlooked. Luke reminds his audience that Zacchaeus was “short in stature”. He was the chief tax collector which made him a collaborator with the Roman occupiers, essentially the most hated man in town. He was wealthy because he benefited financially by being in league with the Romans and that also didn’t help his case with the other people in that town. Jesus could have ordered the tree that Zacchaeus was in to be burned to the ground and there would have literally have been cheers from the crowd and they would have hailed Jesus as the new King David. That is how hated Zacchaeus was. But, as we know, Jesus was not going to be a vengeful kind of messiah the town people were actually hoping for. Like the Book of Wisdom, “But you [O God] have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people’s sins that they may repent.”

Jesus looked up at this man in the tree and said, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” First of all, I find it interesting that Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from a tree when later in the Gospel Jesus will die on a tree for the sake of our salvation. Luke is the only Gospel that records Jesus praying on the cross, “Forgive them Father for they do not know what they do”, words the provocatively accentuate the power of the cross for our salvation. I just mention this as an aside, however, the act of calling Zacchaeus down from the tree, when Jesus will embrace his death on a tree for Zacchaeus’ sins and the sins of the world, is a very striking and poignant detail in this passage from Luke today.

Secondly, Jesus tells Zacchaeus, “Today I must stay at your house.” Setting aside a moment the scandal this would have been to the other town folk, that Jesus was going to stay at the house of the most hated man in town, I am fascinated that with Jesus….he doesn’t ask Zacchaeus for permission to stay at his house. Jesus simply tells Zacchaeus, “Today I must stay at your house.” The use of a house in this passage from Luke seems very archetypal of the soul, doesn’t it?
It reminds me of the words of the centurion to Jesus in another passage, “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but just say the word and I shall be healed.” We say these words during every celebration of Mass before welcoming Jesus into our hearts in the Eucharist. In this passage from Luke, Jesus tells Zacchaeus, “Today I must stay at your house”. Jesus doesn’t ask. Jesus just says “I am coming to your house, whether you like it or not”. This is how much Jesus hungers for Zacchaeus’ conversion.

And so, what happens when we welcome Jesus into our house, into our souls? Zacchaeus has a profound moment of conversion where he proclaims to the whole town, “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.” Zacchaeus was a business man and he knew that words were not enough. He knew that talk was cheap and that actions speak louder than words, so he gave a very visible and tangible sign to the Lord and to the community that his conversion of heart was real. Jesus, recognizing Zacchaeus’ true conversion of heart, responds, “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” Just like we heard from the Book of Wisdom, “But you [O God] have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people’s sins that they may repent.”

My friends, there is so much to reflect on from the Gospel reading this Sunday. What are the areas in our lives that feel “short in stature”, that simply don’t measure up the way they should? What are the areas in our lives that feel stuck in a tree, a place where we long to see Jesus all the while feeling condemned inside like Zacchaeus did? How are we like the townspeople, grumbling that Jesus would have the audacity to give the time of day to a known sinner? Can we enter into this story for a moment, and see Jesus looking straight at us with a patient love and hear his words, “Come down from that tree. Today I must stay at your house”? What is our response?

We have this opportunity today at Mass when we come forward for communion. We have an opportunity to welcome Jesus into the house of our souls. Every reception of Holy Communion is an opportunity for a radical conversion of heart that can put our lives back on track into the life of grace God wants for us. Do we dare? I think at times we can be overwhelmed by God’s invitation. Sometime we look at the universe around us and contemplate how to God all our concerns must be like a grain in a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth. However, if we let Jesus into our homes, into our hearts, into our souls like Zacchaeus, an amazing thing just might happen. We might be surprised by God’s love.