

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

October 30, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Wisdom 11:22-12:2 (You spare all things, because they are yours.)

Responsory: Psalm 145 (I will praise your name forever, my king and my God.)

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2 (We always pray for you... that the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.)

Gospel: Luke 19:1-10 (Zacchaeus, the tax collector, meets Jesus.)

Today Luke introduces us to Zacchaeus, whom he describes as “a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man.” The crowd describes him somewhat differently, as “a sinner.” Note, these people disparaging Zacchaeus are not self-righteous Pharisees. These are *ordinary people*, who are sick and tired of tax collectors like Zacchaeus getting wealthy by defrauding them out of their hard-earned wages. Yet, something about Jesus draws this notorious sinner to him. Zacchaeus goes out of his way, even climbing a tree, in order to *see* Jesus. Just imagine the heckling and jeering directed at him from the angry people below. And, imagine how aghast the crowd would have been when Jesus *stopped*, addressed himself to Zacchaeus, and invited himself to dinner at the tax collector’s house!

The Book of Wisdom offers one explanation for Jesus’ extraordinary action – because God loves *everyone* that he has made, even tax collectors like Zacchaeus. The Lord does not hate the sinner, for God *cannot* loathe the one that he has created. He spares *all* from condemnation, because they *belong* to him, and because God is the “lover of souls.”

Jesus himself gives a more personal reason, citing the mission for which he was sent into the world: “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save *what was lost*.” Zacchaeus *was* lost, and that entire grumbling crowd knew it. But, Jesus also knew something that the crowd did not. He could see that Zacchaeus was on the verge of *conversion*. He had not yet changed his life, but he was *ready* to turn over a new leaf and start fresh. He just needed Jesus to enter into his life and grant him the grace that he lacked. Jesus saw that opportunity and *seized* it, inviting himself into Zacchaeus’ house and *into his heart*. The result is clear. Zacchaeus pledges to give half of his wealth to the poor, and he promises to repay everyone that he has cheated, four times over. He’s truly ready to renounce his past sins and become a new man.

Unfortunately, starting over is not as easy as changing one’s behavior and avoiding the sins of one’s past. There is still the matter of one’s *reputation*. Zacchaeus would have to prove himself to the community, by consistently living out his new commitment to honesty and integrity. That’s true of anyone who goes through a conversion experience. Those who knew the person before will need to be convinced, over a period of time, that a lasting change has really taken place. It can be very frustrating when we see the sins of our past *clinging* to us, even after we have repented and received God’s forgiveness. We can change our ways, but we can’t change people’s memories of us. That’s one reason *why reparations* for our sins are so important. Zacchaeus intended to do more than just stop defrauding people and be honest from that point forward. He also pledged to reach out to the people he had hurt and try to

make up for his sin by repaying them four times over. Maybe that would change people's minds about him; maybe not. What matters more is that he was doing *what he could* to make amends and to right his past wrongs.

If people saw a marked change in Zacchaeus after his encounter with Jesus, and if they came to believe that his conversion was genuine, he could have become quite an inspiration for other sinners. St. Paul famously used his own conversion story in this way. He frequently cited his past persecution of the Church, and Christ's gratuitous outreach to him, as reason for *others* to trust in the Lord's mercy. His message was, "If the Lord could save *me*, then he can save *anybody!*"

I'll never forget a powerful example of this phenomenon that I saw many years ago, when I was serving as Director of a Missionary Program in Southern California. We did intensive three-day retreats for people like Zacchaeus, who were on the cusp of conversion and looking for Jesus. There was one particular men's retreat in which many of the participants were tough-looking guys, sporting prison tattoos. One of the leaders assisting me, himself a former methamphetamine addict, commented: "Many of these fine gentlemen have enjoyed the hospitality of our state's correctional facilities in the past." One of the men, in particular, had been the biggest heroin dealer in the entire Valley, before he was arrested and incarcerated. Many people knew him by his reputation. Then, on the retreat, everyone discovered that he had found Christ during his time in prison, and after he had served his time, he began a new career *as a drug counselor*. His presence and his testimony on that retreat did far more to inspire the other participants than anything that I could have said to them as their Spiritual Director.

Everyone on that retreat saw *Christ* glorified in that former drug dealer, and they saw *him* glorified in Christ. That's exactly what Paul prayed for in his First Letter to the Thessalonians. It happens to all of us, in subtle ways, as we progress on our spiritual journeys. But, when someone undergoes a major conversion experience, the effect is far more obvious. We can see that the person's life has been transformed by a divine power that he did not possess within himself. Hence, *Christ* is glorified in him. And, at the same time, *he* becomes a new creation, by God's grace. Thus, Christ glorifies *him*, as well.

However, as the Book of Wisdom reminds us, the grace of conversion is usually manifested in less dramatic ways – not as a sudden awakening, but a *gradual* process of repentance and renewal. The Lord "rebukes offenders *little by little*, and warns them and reminds them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness." That sounds more like a gentle, persistent invitation, offered again and again, rather than a one-time command to straighten up, or else. Isn't that how our conscience normally seems to work? Rarely do repentance and conversion come all at once. They usually happen *slowly*, as we grow in maturity and virtue, and learn to see the error of our ways.

The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that conversion of heart begins with Christ's outreach to us. He works continuously through our conscience, gently moving us away from sin and toward his love. And, when he senses that we're ready for a further step, he calls us to take it. Let us pray that we may hear those subtle promptings that move us to *look* for the Lord, and that we may respond joyfully whenever he invites himself to enter more fully into our lives.