

31st. Sunday in Ordinary Time

Were you a person who climbed trees when you were young? Did your mother ever call up to you, “Get down from that tree before you fall down.”? I wasn’t much of a tree climber, but I did enjoy climbing onto the roof of our house.

In today’s gospel it wasn’t his mother who called Zachaeus to come down from the tree, but Jesus. And Zachaeus was not a child. He was the chief tax collector in Jericho. Everyone would have known him, and most people would have hated him. His wealth would have come from demanding over and above what the Romans asked of the Jewish people. He would have been considered a sinner and excluded from synagogue worship.

Why did Zachaeus make a fool of himself and climb that tree? To risk being laughed at by the people who despised him, something must have already been happening in his heart. Perhaps he had heard that Jesus was a friend of tax collectors. Perhaps it was more than just curiosity that moved him to take such a risk.

But I am sure that he was not expecting what happened next. When Jesus reached him, he looked up and called him by name to come down from the tree. Perhaps there was a bit of humour in his voice when he said,

“Zacchaeus come down. Hurry for I must stay at your house today.” Come down here where you belong. I want to sit at your table and share a meal with you.

To choose to dine with someone was a sign of something else. It was a way of expressing union and solidarity with another person. It was recognising the dignity and worth of that other person. The others in the town understood what it meant. Those who had ridiculed Zacchaeus were now angry that Jesus had gone to stay at a sinner’s house.

But Zacchaeus knew what it meant too. And this was the moment of change for Zacchaeus. This was the moment when he knew that he was loved by God and forgiven for anything that he had done wrong. And this gave him the freedom to be generous and share his wealth with those around him. “I will give half my property to the poor. If I have cheated anybody, I will pay them back four times the amount.” This was far above what the law was asking of him. I think this is a beautiful example of what happens to us when we allow Jesus to touch our hearts with the gift of his mercy. We open our hearts, not just to the love that Jesus has for us, but we open our hearts in a new way to those around us. When we experience the depth and the generosity of God’s love for us, we open our hearts to others too and become capable of a new kind of generosity towards them. The

people who may have been annoying us are not so bad now. The people in need that we did not see before, now become visible and within the scope of what we can offer them. Perhaps that was Jesus meant when he said that salvation has come to this house. It wasn't just Zacchaeus who benefitted from the mercy of Jesus. His whole house shared in that mercy.

Jesus went on to say, "this man too is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost." Are we able to hear Jesus say that to us? No matter how lost we may seem to be, Jesus always has us in his sight. Jesus takes the initiative with us as he did with Zacchaeus. You could say that all Zacchaeus really did was to climb a tree. It was Jesus who took the initiative. He called Zacchaeus down from the tree and invited himself to have a meal with the despised tax collector. That seems to be the thing that really changed Zacchaeus. That was when he could admit of his sinfulness and open his heart to the mercy and love that Jesus was offering to him.

We are here today because Jesus has taken the initiative and has invited us to share a meal with him. We are not here because we are particularly good people. We have done nothing to deserve to be here. We are reminded of who we are right at the beginning of our gathering. We are sinners who need God's mercy. We seek that mercy

together before we can sing God's praise. When we can see ourselves as the lost ones then we allow Jesus to find us.

When we hear Jesus call us by name as he called Zacchaeus by name then we know that we have been found. When we know that we have been found then like Zacchaeus we have the freedom to use what God has given to us for the sake of others.

We are about to begin the month of November by celebrating two days that are closely linked with each other: All Saints Day and All Souls Day. They are days that invite us to rejoice that we are part of a Church that can draw strength and inspiration from those who have gone before us. We look to the saints as people who model for us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We thank God for the people that we know who have died. They too have been models of discipleship for us. We pray for them. We pray that whatever their faults and limitations that they may be open and ready to receive the fullness of life and love that God is offering to them. And we ask them to pray for us as we continue our journey towards meeting them again.