

GOSPEL

LUKE 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was going through the town when a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man. He was anxious to see what kind of man Jesus was, but he was too short and could not see him for the crowd; so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him: 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today.' And he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully. They all complained when they saw what was happening. 'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house' they said. But Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to the Lord, 'Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor' and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.'

The Gospel of the Lord.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

Today's Gospel places us in the footsteps of Jesus Who, on His way to Jerusalem, stopped in Jericho. There was a great crowd to welcome Him, including a man named Zacchaeus, the head of the "publicans", that is, of those Jews who collected taxes on behalf of the Roman Empire. He was rich not from honest earnings, but because he asked for "bribes", and this increased contempt for him. Zacchaeus "was seeking to see who Jesus was"; he didn't want to meet Him, but he was curious: he wanted to see that character about whom he had heard extraordinary things. He was curious. And being short in stature, "to see him" he climbs up a tree. When Jesus comes close, he looks up and sees Him.

And this is important: the first glance is not from Zacchaeus, but from Jesus, who among the many faces that surrounded Him – the crowd – seeks precisely

that one. The merciful gaze of the Lord reaches us before we ourselves realize that we need it in order to be saved. And with this gaze of the divine Master there begins the miracle of the conversion of the sinner. Indeed, Jesus calls to him, and He calls him by his name: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today" (v. 5). He does not reproach him, He does not deliver a "sermon" to him; He tells him that he must go to Him: "he must", because it is the will of the Father. Despite the murmuring of the people, Jesus chose to stay at the home of that public sinner.

We too would have been scandalized by this behaviour of Jesus. But contempt for and rejection of the sinner only isolate him and cause him to harden in the evil he commits against himself and the community. Instead, God condemns sin, but tries to save the sinner; He goes looking for him to bring him back on the right path. Those who have never felt they are sought by God's mercy find it difficult to grasp the extraordinary greatness of the gestures and words with which Jesus approaches Zacchaeus.

Jesus' acceptance and attention to him lead him to a clear change of mentality: in just a moment he realized how petty life is when it revolves around money, at the cost of stealing from others and receiving their contempt. Having the Lord there, in his house, makes him see everything with different eyes, even with a little of the tenderness with which Jesus looked at him. And his way of seeing and using money also changes: the gesture of grabbing is replaced by that of giving. Indeed, he decides to give half of what he possesses to the poor and to return four times the sum to those from whom he has stolen. Zacchaeus discovers from Jesus that it is possible to love gratuitously: until this moment he was mean, but now he becomes generous; he had a taste for amassing wealth, now he rejoices in distributing. By encountering Love, by discovering that he is loved despite his sins, he becomes capable of loving others, making money a sign of solidarity and communion.

May the Virgin Mary obtain for us the grace always to feel Jesus' merciful gaze upon us, to go with mercy towards those who have erred, so that they too may welcome Jesus, Who "came to seek and to save the lost".

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Zacchaeus, despite his lifestyle, desperately wanted to see Jesus – and perhaps be seen by Jesus. If Jesus were walking along the road outside would you desperately want to see him – would you want him to see you? Why is this the case?
- Zacchaeus was trapped in his beliefs about himself and his situation. Up a tree he was safe. What are the securities which we hold on to in order to feel safe and self-sufficient?
- Zacchaeus was transformed by the encounter with Jesus in his home. What difference does or could your encounter with Jesus and his ongoing friendship make in your life?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.