

31st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – C; Oct. 30th 2022
Wisdom 11:22-12:2; 2Thessalonians 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

J. Oswald Sanders in his book **‘Facing Loneliness,’** writes, *“The millionaire is usually a lonely man and the comedian is often more unhappy than his audience.”* Sometimes we are surprised to hear the news of rich movie actors and musicians committing suicide. They enjoyed more than enough material wealth and fame. Then what went wrong with them? So it is very clear that the source of joy and peace should not be sought in the material wealth and the popularity.

Last Sunday Luke presented a tax collector in a parable who was heartbroken and he stood in the Temple with shame, seeking the mercy of God. In today’s gospel Luke gives us the real story of another tax collector, Zacchaeus. He says that Zacchaeus had to climb on a sycamore tree to see Jesus; for he was short in stature. Perhaps there were many short people in the crowd around Jesus who could see him. Then why did Zacchaeus climb a tree? Most probably, the reason for his strange behavior was that, first of all, as a tax collector he was afraid of the people. For, he was hated by them as he charged them unjustly. At the same time he could not overcome his curiosity to have a glimpse of Jesus. So in order to hide himself from the public view he climbed on the tree. Rationally speaking, for Jesus, who was surrounded by big crowd, Zacchaeus was an unimportant figure. But in the eyes of Jesus, he was a lost sheep and also the son of the same Heavenly Father and he should be brought back to the flock.

In the Book of Wisdom we have just heard, **“But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people’s sins that they may repent.”** This exactly what the nature of God is that He does not wish the death of any sinner rather rejoices in his/her return. In the *Book of Ezekiel 33:11, the Lord says to the Prophet, “As I live, I swear I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked man, but rather in the wicked man’s conversion, that he may live.”* The kind gesture of Jesus to stay in the house of Zacchaeus literally shocked him and the people too. But at the same time it led to his conversion. For the first time Zacchaeus found joy in giving rather hoarding the wealth. And he could raise his head before the people once again and they could accept him. We don’t know whether Zacchaeus followed Jesus as Matthew the tax collector did. But we can conclude that he never went back to his old life style.

In this beautiful story of Zacchaeus, the final statement of Jesus is the most important truth ever revealed in Scripture. It is very comforting for us too, who are sinners before the Almighty God. Jesus says, **“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”** Yes, God is a seeker of the sinners and He is their life saver. It is very clear from the parable of the lost sheep in Luke chapter 15. There we find a shepherd going after his one lost sheep and rejoices over finding it. Though there were a lot of good people around Jesus, Zacchaeus was the lost sheep whom Jesus could not ignore. The merciful gesture of Jesus saved Zacchaeus. Jesus comments on his conversion, **“Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham.”**

Perhaps, physically Zacchaeus was a short man. But it has a spiritual symbolism too. When anyone becomes the slaves of sins he/she becomes short in stature before God and people and will fail to see God. And also Luke says that he had to climb a tree. Actually, due to his guilt feeling Zacchaeus climbed a tree just to escape from Jesus. In the case of Adam and Eve, after committing their first sin they hid themselves among the trees. The first parents who always lived in the presence of God didn't want to come into His presence due to their guilt feeling and shame. So God had to come out in search of them (Gen. 3:8, 9). It is very clear that in the state of sin, one is unable to see and seek God. The more the sins one commits the farther he/she goes away from God. In the salvation history, it is always God who came in search of the lost ones. In the Book of Ezekiel God says, **“I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, shepherding them rightly”** (Ezekiel 34:16). So if God does not take the initiative to come out in search of us, we remain lost in our shame and desperation and never to return to God. This is what Jesus is saying here that he has come to seek and save the sinners.

Another important truth also we learn from the story of Zacchaeus. Perhaps, he was doing the tax collection for years and cheated many poor people. But he never realized that he did anything wrong. Once he saw Jesus face to face, though by chance, he could see himself as he was; in other words, his sinfulness became crystal clear before him. In our case too, when we stand before the Lord we see our real face. It is a lot easier for us to hide many things from people and pretend for what we are not. We all can wear masks. But once we are in the presence of God, our masks fall apart. Then my true self is exposed.