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I Need to Stay at Your House

Biblical Reflection for 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time C

Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, OCT. 26, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Today's Gospel story remains forever engraved in my memory. I still remember a song from my early grade school years that began with, "There was a man from Jericho named Zacchaeus." Years later, I would visit Jericho on many occasions during my graduate studies in the Holy Land -- to get away from Jerusalem on some damp, cold wintry day in order to enjoy Jericho's mild climate, or to savor the dates, mangos, lemons and other fruits for which the city's outdoor markets are famous. Jericho is rightly called the City of Palms in the Old Testament. It is truly an oasis in the desert!

The locals still point out to us foreigners the exact location of Rahab's house. She was the infamous prostitute of the Old Testament who made it into Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. Her "house" had become an accounting office on one of my last visits to Jericho.

The locals also take delight in pointing out the ruins of the walls that Joshua brought down in one of the Old Testament's mighty battles that may have never taken place! Best of all are the 39 or so sycamore trees that Zacchaeus climbed in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was passing by, and the house of the town's chief tax collector-turned-saint!

Small stature

Today's Gospel is one of Jesus' beloved meals scenes in the New Testament. Luke's portrait of Zacchaeus is vivid and irresistibly charming! The story of Jericho's famous tax collector (Luke 19:1-10) is unique to Luke's gospel. We are told that he was the chief tax collector and very wealthy at that. While a rich man, Zacchaeus provides a contrast to the rich man of Luke 18:18-23 who cannot detach himself from his material possessions to become a follower of Jesus. Zacchaeus, according to Luke, exemplifies the proper attitude toward wealth: He promises to give half of his possessions to the poor, and consequently is the recipient of salvation.

The evangelist's graphic description is enhanced in also calling him a "little man." His is a kind of smallness that is far more devastating and corroding than being short. His smallness emerges from his terrible self-image resulting from others' attitudes toward him. Are we not most vulnerable at these moments in our lives?

Though a member of a group that was widely despised, Zacchaeus appears in today's story as a fundamentally honest and humble man who seeks the truth and is open to finding it where he can, even if it means climbing a sycamore tree in a crowd, just to catch a glimpse of Jesus. He represents that figure who turns up again and again in the scriptures -- the outsider, the person who for one reason or another looks in from the edge, but must always stay there. It is on the edge that we meet him, shut out by others, desperately anxious to be part of the proceedings, all the while failing.

The parade at our front door

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Why would Zacchaeus be so intent on catching a glimpse of Jesus? Perhaps because Jesus is all that he is not! Jesus is admired, sought out, and above all accepted by a large following. If we are terribly honest with ourselves, we would admit that at some point in our own loneliness or alienation, in our real or imagined non-acceptance or un-love, we long to identify with someone else's seeming acceptance.

Do we not often strain our necks, like Zacchaeus in his tree, imprisoned in our loneliness, envy, jealousy, self-pity, laziness? And then suddenly, the unexpected happens. The parade stops at our front door, and we get an invitation with astonishing words: "I'm really glad to see that you are here," or "Let's go out for a coffee, you've had a hard day," or "Come and join us, it's not good to be alone," or "When are you going to invite me over? I'd really like to have supper with you." And the list goes on and on. An invitation leads to the most intimate favor of hospitality.

Houseguest

"Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:5). "Zacchaeus": Jesus called by name a man despised by all. "Today": Yes, this very moment was the moment of his salvation. "I must stay": Why "I must"? Because the Father, rich in mercy, wants Jesus "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Zacchaeus' repentance is attested by his determination to amend his former ways, and shows himself to be a true descendant of Abraham, the true heir to the promises of God in the Old Testament. Underlying Luke's depiction of Zacchaeus as a descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jews, is his recognition of the central place occupied by Israel in the plan of salvation.

When the favor is asked of Zacchaeus, and all those like him who are accustomed to being shunned and rejected, Zacchaeus and his types are dizzy with excitement. The walls of Jericho truly come tumbling down! Perhaps for the first time, Zacchaeus is accepted without reservation or condition. And that is cause for great rejoicing, not shame. In true Lukan fashion, there is a celebration! Once again, those murmuring are shocked that Jesus would go to the house -- and even more shocked, to the table -- of a sinner so famous as Zacchaeus. As Jesus sat at the table among such high-society, he watched Zacchaeus rise up out of the ashes and the tomb of alienation, self-deception, dishonesty, which he himself had constructed.

Salvation arrives

Jesus declares publicly, "Today salvation has come to this house." It's almost as if Jesus said to the chief tax collector of Jericho, and through him, to each of us, "Zacchaeus, don't climb too high in that tree of yours ... and hide from me. Don't waste all your energy concentrating on your guilt as you see it. I need to talk with you and find out where you have boxed yourself in. Together we'll find a way past all of your excuses and out of the maze. Look, the tree is sprouting. I've come to save you!"

Morals of the story

Over the years, I have found several morals in this ancient story. One of them tells us that when it comes to the love of God, we must first declare that we are lost and empty, and then begin the process whereby we are found. We must name and own the masks we wear before we can ever begin to remove them and the makeup, and see our true face. We have to experience the death at work in us, our hearts, emotions, intellects, relationships and self esteem, in order to begin the journey up to Jerusalem, the City of the Resurrection. And sometime, we may have to stop feeling sorry for ourselves, let down our defenses, jump down from the trees in which we were hiding, give half of our belongings to the poor, and pay back those we have cheated. Who cares what the critics are saying? When salvation has come into our societies, our communities, our homes

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and our hearts, no one can ever rob us of that precious gift any longer.

Transformation

In his Letter to Priests written for Holy Thursday 2002 (Nos. 5-6), the Servant of God Pope John Paul II wrote these words about today's delightful Gospel story:

"Everything that happens to him (Zacchaeus) is amazing. If there had not been, at a certain point, the 'surprise' of Christ looking up at him, perhaps he would have remained a silent spectator of the Lord moving through the streets of Jericho. Jesus would have passed by, not into, his life. Zacchaeus had no idea that the curiosity which had prompted him to do such an unusual thing was already the fruit of a mercy which had preceded him, attracted him and was about to change him in the depths of his heart. [...]

"Luke's account is remarkable for the tone of the language: Everything is so personal, so tactful, so affectionate! Not only is the text filled with humanity; it suggests insistence, an urgency to which Jesus gives voice as the one offering the definitive revelation of God's mercy. He says: 'I must stay at your house,' or to translate even more literally: 'I need to stay at your house' (v 5). Following the mysterious road map which the Father has laid out for him, Jesus runs into Zacchaeus along the way. He pauses near him as if the meeting had been planned from the beginning. Despite all the murmuring of human malice, the home of this sinner is about to become a place of revelation, the scene of a miracle of mercy. True, this will not happen if Zacchaeus does not free his heart from the ligatures of egoism and from his unjust and fraudulent ways. But mercy has already come to him as a gratuitous and overflowing gift. Mercy has preceded him! [...]

"This is what happens in the case of Zacchaeus. Aware that he is now being treated as a 'son,' he begins to think and act like a son, and this he shows in the way he rediscovers his brothers and sisters. Beneath the loving gaze of Christ, the heart of Zacchaeus warms to love of neighbor. From a feeling of isolation, which had led him to enrich himself without caring about what others had to suffer, he moves to an attitude of sharing. This is expressed in a genuine 'division' of his wealth: 'half of my goods to the poor.' The injustice done to others by his fraudulent behavior is atoned for by a fourfold restitution: "If I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (v 8). And it is only at this point that the love of God achieves its purpose, and salvation is accomplished: "Today salvation has come to this house" (v 9)."

[The readings for the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time are Wisdom 11:22-12:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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