

**Climbing the tree of our cross**  
**31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C**

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Today's Gospel presents the story of the encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a job which was not well regarded by people. They were considered public thieves, because they would take the money from the people to give it to a foreign empire. Money, which was not re invested in the same town or country, but given to the enemy. Moreover, Zacchaeus was not a regular bureaucrat, he was a chief tax collector, the boss. The Gospel also mentions that he was wealthy. We don't know if he became rich due to corruption and fraud, something not uncommon for tax agents at that time.

According to the mentality of the time, a person with so many aggravating factors could not earn salvation. People would firmly believe that tax collectors would suffer everlasting damnation for all of their wrongdoings, and especially for taking the money from the poor to give it to the enemy.

But it happened that Zacchaeus had in his heart the desire to meet Jesus. He longed to see Jesus. His deep desire moved him to do impossible things to see him. Jericho was a city where many prophets and people would pass by. It was the second largest place in Palestine. For Zacchaeus, the prophet who was about to pass by had something special, and he wanted to see him. However, he had another problem, he was short in stature, and due to the crowd, there was not a possible way to see Jesus passing by. So he decided to climb a sycamore, a massive tree that grows 70 to 100 feet.

In my different trips with the Popes, I like to think about this passage of the Gospel when I see people doing different things just to see the Pope pass by, even if it is only for 2-3 seconds. From that we learned that we must cultivate our love, reverence, and respect to our Holy Father. He is the Vicar of Christ the Successor of St. Peter.

When Jesus reached the place, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house" (Lk 19:5). And right away Zacchaeus came down from the tree. I always like to think about Jesus' divine glance to Zacchaeus. His divine and tender look in Zacchaeus' eyes conquered his heart and provoked in him a desire for conversion, and repentance. When Zacchaeus came down, he stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over" (Lk 19:8). By his humility Zacchaeus was exalted, made worthy to welcome the Lord into his house. By his faith, he was justified. He was made righteous, not because of his sins or merits but because he let the Lord enter into his life. Nobody can make himself righteous. As we can see it in today's Gospel, Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the son of man has come to seek and save what was lost" (Lk 19:9-10). As the Gospel of John said in today's Alleluia verse, "God

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so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16)

Zacchaeus tells us something important. He had to climb a tall tree to see Jesus and have an encounter with him. Such encounter changed his life forever. We don't have to climb the sycamore tree, but in our life we need to climb the tree of our own crosses. One of the places where we must strive to look for Jesus is the cross. In our own crosses we have the opportunity to encounter God and receive his saving grace.

No matter how unworthy a person can be, if he has a desire to open his heart to the Lord, God will do the rest. Zacchaeus was already condemned in this life by his fellow citizens. When Jesus told Zacchaeus that he must go to his house, people start grumbling. They could not believe Jesus would go into the house of such an impure and evil man. They were sure that after this life Zacchaeus would go upside down to hell. But his encounter with Jesus changed his story. The book of Wisdom, which we read in the first reading, explained this very well, God “you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people's sins that they may repent” (Wis 11:23). Our God does not use punishment to get us closer to him. His pedagogy is not our pedagogy. In the story of Zacchaeus we see that human distorted pedagogy would punish and condemn people for their wrongdoings, weather they be true or false. But the Divine Pedagogy is different, God rebukes “offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe (Wis 12,2). That is the Divine pedagogy: when people are not in the right way, God warns them, and remind them in a tender way, so that they can abandon their wrongdoings. How many times God has worked like that in our own life? We shall see those times as the opportunities God gave us to get closer to him.

Pope Francis said, “Jesus seeks us out. He wants to heal our wounds, to soothe our feet which hurt from travelling alone, to wash each of us clean of the dust from our journey. He doesn't ask us where we have been, he doesn't question us what about we have done. Rather, he tells us: ‘Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me’ (Jn 13:8). Unless I wash your feet, I will not be able to give you the life which the Father always dreamed of, the life for which he created you. Jesus comes to meet us, so that he can restore our dignity as children of God. He wants to help us to set out again, to resume our journey, to recover our hope, to restore our faith and trust. He wants us to keep walking along the paths of life, to realize that we have a mission” (Pope Francis, speech at Curran-Fromhold facility, Sept 27, 2015).

When we have an encounter with Jesus (in our own crosses, sharing his), he with his Divine Pedagogy educates our hearts, so that we can know and experience the fullness of Truth, not a watered-down faith. Benedict XVI said, God educates “the taste for true joy, in every area of life – family, friendship, solidarity with those who suffer, self-renunciation for the sake of the other, love of knowledge, art, the beauty of nature — all this means exercising the inner taste and producing antibodies that can fight the trivialization and the dulling widespread today. Adults too need to rediscover this joy, to desire authenticity, to purify themselves of the mediocrity that might infest them. It will then become easier to drop or reject everything that although attractive proves to be, in fact, insipid, a source of indifference and not of freedom.” ( Benedict XVI – General Audience- November 7, 2012) An encounter with God (in our own crosses, sharing his) will take us away from mediocrity in our faith, in our spiritual life, in our work, in our relationships with God and with others.

St Paul said in the second reading today “We always pray, so that you can be made worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith, that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him.” (2 Thes 1:11-2)

As it happened with Zacchaeus, Christ will reward every effort to draw near to him. We can see that nobody is beyond the reach of God’s grace. We should never abandon hope in anyone, even when all seems lost. God is omnipotent. And the cross can be an opportunity for him to pour out his graces upon us and upon the people we pray for.

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### **For Meditation**

We need to ask ourselves: Do I want to see Christ? Do I prefer not to see him? Or Do I prefer him not to see me? And If I already see him in some way, Do I prefer to see him afar, not drawing to near to him? Do I see my cross as an opportunity to encounter Jesus and receive his saving grace?

### **For further reading**

St. Augustine Sermon 174

But you’re going to say, “If I become Zacchaeus, I won’t be able to see Jesus.” Don’t let that get you down; climb the tree on which Jesus hung for you, and you will see Jesus. And what kind of tree did Zacchaeus climb? A sycamore. It doesn’t grow at all, or very rarely perhaps, in our part of the world. But in those parts this kind of tree and fruit is very common. Sycamores are what a fruit is called that is like figs; and yet there’s a definite difference, which those who’ve seen or tasted them can tell. However, as far as the meaning of the name goes, sycamores translate into English as “silly figs.” Now look at my friend Zacchaeus, look at him please, wanting to see Jesus in the crowd and not being able to. He was lowly, you see, the crowd was proud; and the crowd, as is the way with a crowd, was hindering itself from seeing the Lord well. He climbed away from the crowd and saw Jesus, without the crowd getting in his way.

So now, because it was Zacchaeus, because he was a head tax collector, because he was very much of a sinner; that crowd being, so it would seem, of sound mind and good health, though it was preventing people from seeing Jesus, that crowd was astonished and expressed disapproval of Jesus entering the house of a sinner. This amounted to disapproving of the doctor entering the house of a sick person. So because Zacchaeus was scoffed at as a sinner, scoffed at though by those of unsound mind after being restored to sound health himself, the Lord answered the scoffers, Today salvation came to this house (Lk 19:9). There you are, that’s why I entered; salvation came to this house. Clearly, if the Savior hadn’t entered, salvation wouldn’t have happened in that house.

So why are you astonished, sick man? Call in Jesus yourself as well, don’t regard yourself as being in good health. It’s with hope that a person is sick who welcomes the doctor; but desperately sick indeed is the one who in a frenzy beats the doctor. So what sort of frenzy must possess the person who kills the doctor? And on the other hand, what must the goodness and power of the doctor be, who from his own blood made a medicine for his crazy killer? After all, the one who had come to seek and to save what had got lost didn’t say in vain as he hung there, Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing (Lk 23:24). “They are in a frenzy, I’m the doctor; let them rave and rage, I bear it patiently; it’s when they’ve killed me that I will heal them.”

So let us be among those whom he heals. The word is human and worthy of total acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tm 1:15); whether great or small, to save sinners. The Son of man has come to seek and to save what had got lost (Lk 19:10).