

Our theme continues from last week: God's attitude towards the sinner and social outcast. Today we have the story of one of the little men in the bible who nonetheless stands high above his chums Nehemiah and Bildad the Shuhite!!

Zacchaeus: chief tax collector and very rich. Describing him as a chief tax collector said just one thing to everyone: he was a detestable creep. His modern equivalent would be something akin to a drug baron, or a mafia chief who work through threats, extortion and murder. But this little man wanted to see who Jesus was. We are not at first given the reason. Was it just curiosity towards a person about whom he had heard so many stories? Or was there a deeper reason?

We are told that Zacchaeus was small and, because of the crowd surrounding Jesus, he could not see Jesus. So, despite being a rich and important man, he did not hesitate to climb a tree to get a better look. He would not have been very welcome among the crowds anyway. He was not a person people would like to have had around.

There is a message there somehow. Very often we are not able to see Jesus in our lives because we are crowded out by other people and the way they think. To see Jesus clearly we often must get away from the crowd and risk being different, risk losing our dignity.

Whatever else about Zacchaeus, he certainly is a seeker, a searcher. The text says that "he was anxious to see what kind of man Jesus was. He is *trying to see Jesus*. It's not just curiosity. He wants to know who Jesus is, what it is about this Prophet that so attracts people. This was not an easy thing for a man snug within his own world. His desire for Jesus will change his life. But first he has obstacles to surmount, and not just his size: we are led to believe that his life wasn't motivated by very noble ideals. The people are another impediment: he must overcome social prejudices that make it difficult for him to have a personal and responsible meeting with Jesus. But Zacchaeus keeps at his quest simply and sincerely. He runs to get ahead of the crowd, and climbs a tree like a child. He doesn't think about his dignity as an important person. He only wants to find a moment and a place adequate to contact Jesus. He wants to see him.

That's when he discovers that Jesus also is seeking him. There are decisive moments when Jesus passes through our life because he wants to save us from ourselves! He won't let us escape from it.

Just look how many times it says of Jesus that he was passing by. He is always on the move it seems, making himself available to those who notice, or want to see him. If he is not stopped, he will keep going. Similarly, he constantly passes through our lives. He comes every day in one form or another. He will come into my life today. Will I recognise him? Where am I expecting to find him? In what person? In what place? In what experience? To be ready I must be prepared to meet him in ANY experience.

But what an invitation!

Imagine Zacchaeus' surprise when Jesus looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." What wonderful words for Zacchaeus to hear! How wonderful when Jesus says them to us! Yet at every Eucharist he makes his invitation at communion. But at many other times too he wishes to enter our lives. The Book of Revelation has Jesus in a beautiful image: "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his house and eat with him and he will eat with me" (Rev 3:20). Are our doors always open and ready to offer him hospitality?

Zacchaeus has no hesitation. He climbs down quickly, delighted to welcome Jesus into his house. The reaction of the crowd, however, is something else. They are deeply shocked and scandalised. "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Of all the people in Jericho, Jesus picks the house of possibly the most obnoxious and detested person in the town.

It is not the first time this charge was made about Jesus. On another occasion the Pharisees said, "He mixes with sinners and tax collectors and even eats with them." Of course, they do not understand Jesus' point of view. There was no need for him to go to the houses of the good. It was those who were far from God that he went looking for. "People who are well do not need a doctor but only those who are sick. I have not come to call the respectable people but the outcasts" (Mark 2:17)

The remarks of the crowd are seen to be those of religious bigots and hypocrites who put themselves on a higher moral plane than others. To be honest, this is something we have all been guilty of at one time or another.

There are two interpretations of what follows, depending on how one reads the original text.

Our translation from the Greek goes on: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." This implies that Zacchaeus, because of his encounter with Jesus, has undergone a radical conversion. He will give up his corrupt and rapacious ways. He will share his wealth with the poor and will make restitution to those he has cheated.

All this is in striking comparison to another rich man, an apparently very good man. He asked Jesus what he should do "to gain eternal life". Jesus' answer was, "Keep the commandments, the laws of God's people." "I have done that all my life," says the rich man. "Then," says Jesus, "there is just one more thing. Share what you have with the poor and then come and follow me." And this very religious, very pious man, went away sad-faced "because he had many possessions" and could not let go of them.

Here, though, we have another rich man, apparently far from being religious or pious, a sinner in the eyes of the public, giving away half of his wealth. He will become a disciple. He has the necessary qualifications.

However, scholars point to another way of reading the text which seems closer to the original text of Luke. In this interpretation, Zacchaeus speaks in the present tense: "Half of my possessions I give to the poor; and if I find I have taken more than I should, I pay fourfold."

In other words, although he is a tax collector and apparently rich, he is, in fact, a very good man. Jesus recognised that when he invited himself into Zacchaeus's house. The crowd, however, judged Zacchaeus simply by his profession. He is a tax collector; therefore, he is an evil and corrupt man. And he was treated as an outcast not to be approached by any decent person. A perfect example of stereotyping and of judging people's 'holiness' by their external observance of religious ritual.

But Jesus always sees beyond the external to the potential inside. He praises the repentant tax collector in last week's Gospel over against the proud and arrogant Pharisee. Today he praises a tax collector whom he knows to be a good and generous person. He sees a **unique individual** and not just a stereotype.

How often are we blinded by the stereotype of a person's profession, or race, or religion, or gender and fail to see the unique individual inside?

As a faith community, we have often found it sufficient to say we are "open and affirming" or tolerant or inclusive. In some places we even hang banners saying, "All are welcome."

Jesus has the last word today. "Today salvation, wholeness, has come to this house, because Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham." 'Son of Abraham' was a title for a good-living Jew and sometimes applied to Christians in the early Church. The sign of this is that he has received Jesus joyfully into his home. Something we are called to do every day. "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" — the lost include those regarded as sinners and those who are marginalised by so-called respectable society.

They are the people to whom we Christians, as disciples of Jesus, are also expected to pay special attention. We need to be particularly careful about pre-judging people, about slotting them into stereotyped compartments... Stereotypes do not really exist.

Only unique individuals with unique needs exist. Jesus saw, not a tax collector, but the unique person, Zacchaeus. Just as in the house of Simon the Pharisee he saw not a prostitute but a deeply contrite and loving person. Every person has the right to be treated with respect and dignity, no matter who they are or what they are like.

For God there are no stereotypes.