

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time C/2016

The readings of this Sunday talk about the grandeur of mercy of God. They show that God is merciful and forgiving. They invite us to entrust our lives to the mercy of God.

The first reading recalls the grandeur and the love of God in creating the universe and everything in it. It shows that everything remains in life by his will and because they belong to him. It also shows that God warns his people so they abandon their sins and believe in him.

What is behind this text is the affirmation of the bounty of God and his continually desire to forgive the sins of his beloved ones.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel in which Jesus welcomes the tax collector, Zacchaeus. First of all, the Gospel speaks of the trip of Jesus through the town of Jericho.

It speaks also of a certain Zaccheus who wanted to see Jesus and could not because of the crowd and of his short stature. Then, it explains what Zaccheus did as he climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus.

After that, the Gospel reports the reaction of Jesus as he invited Zacheus to come down from the tree and went to dine to his home. The Gospel speaks also of the reaction of the people who started complaining about Jesus' welcoming attitude of sinners and the pledge of Zaccheus to give back what he had robbed from people.

The Gospel ends with Jesus' statement that the Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today I want to talk about the abundant mercy of God. What do I mean by that? In order to better understand the point of Jesus and his critics, we have first to know the functioning of Israel society. In fact, Israel was a very structured and religious society. It had many religious groups, like the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Sadducees and the zealots. Besides those groups, there were the publicans and the Tax collectors.

The tax collectors in particular were despised of people because of their perceived greed and collaboration with the Romans occupiers. As they were collecting the tax, they manipulated the money for their benefit at the expense of their fellow Jews. For instance, they amassed personal wealth by demanding the tax payment beyond what was required. In that sense, they were not only cheating, but they also did not respect the Law of Moses.

For that reason, there was a general displeasure with them in society. They were considered as enemies of the nation, traitors who became wealthy by collaborating with Roman authorities at the expense of their own people and above all sinners.

The thing, however, is that the Pharisees along with other groups admitted that everyone is a sinner and in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. But, for the sin of the tax collectors, it was unforgivable because they were deliberately and persistently transgressing the Law without shame. That explains the low esteem they had in public opinion.

However, in spite of this held opinion, Jesus will welcome them with joy and even dine with them, as we see in the case of Zaccheus.

But, why is Jesus doing so? I believe that it is for a couple of reasons I want to share with you. First, Jesus wants to extend the kingdom of God to them and proclaim the message of salvation to them. It is like saying to them: "Straighten up your life and keep the law. Do not let yourself down; the kingdom of God is yours too. I believe that is why Jesus says that this man too is a descendant of Abraham.

How great is this message! But also, how often did we not lock people in their sins and refuse to approach them or even to discourage them to be part of our circle of life because they were sinners. How true is all that even today!

The second reason is that God's love is bigger than human sin. No doubt that God dislikes sins, but he loves sinners. When a sinner decides to get out of his situation of the past and changes, God welcomes him.

In other words, God does not lock people in their sins. He offers always and continually a second chance so that people come to salvation. That chance is what Zaccheus was looking for. Now that it was given to him how could he not pledge to give back what he took from people?

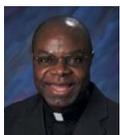
The third reason is that Jesus wants to show us that God's forgiveness is at hand for anyone willing it. Therefore, he is not afraid to welcome sinners and bring them God's forgiveness. Such an attitude is exactly the opposite of what we do. That is why we are judgmental and harsh with the sinners.

In other words, Jesus teaches us that the call to change for sinners is more effective when it comes from a person who has demonstrated that he truly loves and cares for them. As Pope Francis says "priests (should) be shepherds" and have the "odor of sheep" and not those who stay at distance and distribute blame and condemnation. That is why the word of Jesus: "The Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost" should challenge each one of us.

The last reason why Jesus has gone to the house of Zaccheus seems to me that he wanted to tell him in person that he has looked for happiness in the wrong place. Now God is willing to give him true happiness, which does not depend on human riches acquired through cheating, but rather in the peace of heart. It seems to me also that though Zaccheus was a wealthy person, he was not happy. That is why he wanted to see Jesus not necessarily by curiosity, but because he did want not to miss a so great opportunity of meeting Jesus and which would change the trajectory of his life, namely making peace with God.

In turn, let us ask God to forgive us our sins and gives us his peace. God bless you all!

Wisdom 11: 22-12: 2; 2 Thessalonians 1: 11-2: 2; Luke 19: 1-10



Homily Date: October 30, 2016
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Document Name: 20161030homily