

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Nov 3rd 2013

PRE-PRAYERING

The Eucharist is a “Thanksgiving Sacrifice” in which we join the thanksgiving life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in which we ask to be made an “ever-lasting gift” to God. In our celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, we enter in to a “holy exchange” in which we are both the receivers and made the gifts at the same time.

As we live out both realities these days of faith, we might pray with our experiences of receiving gifts of all kinds, verbal, emotional, material, and even mysterious ones. We can pray as well with the opportunities we have to be gifts, sent by the Eucharist, to the lives around us. Our giving ourselves as gifts is definitely a strong prayer of thanksgiving as it was in the total life of Jesus, including his death.

REFLECTION

Our First Reading for this liturgy is a psalm or poetic hymn in praise of the all-powerful, yet merciful God. This passage is so beautiful that it should be read veeee-rrrr-yyy slow-ly. The Book of Wisdom has many of these reflections upon the goodness of God. Here God is presented as the Creator of every particular thing which in themselves are very small.

God is seen as the lover of all things and could never “hate” anything because God created everything out of love. It is something to ponder that the only thing God did not create is the one thing we can offer to God and that is our sin. The hymn concludes with a reflection that God’s love extends also to reminding sinners of their ways that they might become more aware of how God does not abandon them, but regards them as a creation of love.

The whole psalm sings of creation, and especially the human creation, is an extension of God’s revelation and “mercy is above all of God’s works.” Mercy itself is then a continuation of the creational relationship God continues to initiate.

In today’s Gospel we meet one of the singular characters in Scripture. Once again we have a reversal characteristic in Luke’s Gospel. Zacchaeus has some social problems. He is small. He is a tax collector for the dominating Roman Empire which is taking money from the Jewish people, his kinfolk. He is

also rich himself, which puts him above his neighbors. In a strange way, he is, by being small, below others, but by his occupation, he has made himself above others. He climbs a tree to just catch a glimpse of Jesus Who was to pass that way. Zacchaeus literally puts himself above his neighbors, but at a safe distance from Jesus, not wanting to be seen or encountered. The text says that Zacchaeus put himself in a position to see, but Jesus is the One who sees him first.

In the previous chapter, (Luke 18, 26) there is a big question about who can be saved. It follows the story of Jesus' calling a rich man to leave everything to follow him and the man could not do it, because of his riches. Our Gospel answers the question with Jesus' saying that he must stay at the house of Zacchaeus. Tax collectors and all kinds of other sinners can be saved if they allow themselves to be seen by Jesus and so too, by themselves.

Jesus does not say anything about conversion, or giving up his day-job, or his fortune. Jesus says only that he desires to stay with this socially inert fellow. Zacchaeus is reduced, or re-sized to his dignity. He slides down the tree and welcomes Jesus joyfully. He also welcomes himself by reducing the size of his possessions. He fulfills the Jewish law of repayment and Luke has Zacchaeus do what the Rich Man in the previous chapter could not do, he gave half his riches to the "poor". Conversion follows encounter; Jesus meets us and the relationship makes the difference in our actions.

The Gospel continues with the grumbling bystanders making a prophetic announcement: "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." The story ends with Jesus restating his mission of seeking and saving the "lost". This too is central to Luke's presentation of Jesus. He is the One who came to see and find Zacchaeus, who like the Prodigal Son, was lost and now found. He has come to take up residence with us.

I wonder often about how these people whom Jesus forgave lived in the present, considering each had a personal past with which they had to live. Various people such as Zacchaeus had to live with their histories. He lived among his Jewish townfolk from whom he had collected unjust taxes and they knew him as more wealthy than he should have been living. Zacchaeus himself had to live with himself as well. This is not easy for any of us to do either.

There is a double message for us here then. God's forgiveness of us is not a legal arrangement, but more personal and relational. God desires that we live free from and free for the future. The forgiving touch of Jesus is also to be extended through us to others. We are invited by grace to live forgivingly with those who seek God's touch, even though we know their sinful histories ourselves. The Apostle Paul had his past; Augustine, Ignatius and many others had to live beyond their personal

imprisonments. We climb down from our trees of inferiority and allow Jesus to meet us there and raise us up so to send us to de-tree others and free them, as we can, to live beyond their self-confining judgments.

“You will show me the path of life, the fullness of joy in Your presence , O Lord.”

Larry Gillick, S.J.