



Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time October 31, 2010 C

OVERLOOKING SIN LEADS TO CONVERSION AT LEAST IN ZACCHAEUS CASE

The first reading today states that “*God overlooks sins so that people can repent.*”

Today’s Gospel is a practical demonstration of the above Word. Reflecting on today’s Gospel, Fr. Denis McBride, English Redemptorist priest, writes:

JESUS' ACCEPTANCE OF A BIG SINNER LEADS TO HIS CONVERSION

We all have our own images of God. Sometimes people imagine God as the great accountant who keeps exact records of everyone's wrongdoing. This God preserves the details of our failings on computer; nothing escapes his attention, nothing is overlooked by him. Given what he sees, he regards his handiwork in creation with omnipotent disapproval, and he waits for the last day when he can confront us with the punishing record of our sin. This depiction of God is a world away from the image of God presented in today's first reading, which comes from the book of Wisdom:

***You are merciful to all people,
because you can do all things and overlook
men's sins so that they can repent.***

You love all that exists...

***You spare all things because all things are yours,
Lord, lover of life...***

In this radical understanding, God is celebrated as the great lover of life who abhors nothing he has made and who conserves his own creation in a spirit of mercy. Out of this commitment to showing mercy God deals with sinners: he "overlooks people's sins so that they can repent." The sequence is important: first, God overlooks sin; after that, repentance is expected. That sequence underlines the difference between the way God forgives and the way we forgive: we demand repentance first, then we may overlook the wrong. Unlike us, God is a professional artist at forgiving. His alertness to sin does not mean that he stays with it, transfixed by human wrongdoing; he overlooks it, hoping that this generosity of spirit will lead sinners to repentance.

The chief tax-collector

That attitude to sinners is evident in today's Gospel, when we see how Jesus treats Zacchaeus. Jesus was passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Jericho was a wealthy city, an important customs center on the trade route between Jerusalem and the East. It was the ideal spot for an ambitious tax-collector. Zacchaeus as chief tax-collector would seem to have more than distinguished himself in exploiting others for his own purposes. Although his occupation made him very rich, it would have made him an obvious target for the hatred of his fellow Jews. Tax-collectors were put in the same company as thieves, murderers and prostitutes. And because they were in the employment of the Romans, they were regarded as traitors by their own people.

Confined to his own small circle of friends, Zacchaeus would have had a lonely and isolated life; his riches gave him a loveless privilege. But he has heard of the prophet from Nazareth and his reputation for dealing with sinners and outcasts. Perhaps Zacchaeus had heard that Jesus had a former tax-collector, Levi, who had started his apostleship by organizing a feast for Jesus and his fellow tax-collectors (5:27-32). Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus; the Gospel does not say that he wants to meet Jesus. The tax-collector is too small to see over the crowd, so he climbs a sycamore tree. From there, he could overlook Jesus as he passed by.

Jesus' attitude to sinners

Jesus, however, does not pass by the tree; he notices the little man up a tree. Jesus initiates the contact and calls Zacchaeus by name. He does not shout condemnation at Zacchaeus, which might only have served to drive him farther up the tree. Jesus does not exact repentance from him; rather, he overlooks the sins of Zacchaeus and invites him down from his lonely perch. "Hurry, because I must stay at your house today."

Zacchaeus is delighted to welcome Jesus to his house. The crowd, on the other hand, is enraged. But Jesus is more interested in the outcast than the outraged. The crowd is transfixed by the sins Zacchaeus has committed: Jesus sees beyond the sins to the person that Zacchaeus can become. And Jesus' generous

attitude to the tax-collector has good results: Zacchaeus does make public amends for his wrongdoing.

Jesus does not demand repentance from Zacchaeus before eating with him. *The sequence is important: Jesus overlooks the wrongdoing of Zacchaeus in the hope that he will repent. Because of Jesus' attitude to sinners in welcoming them and eating with them, Jesus gives them the opportunity for repentance in an atmosphere of acceptance. That is why Zacchaeus comes down from the tree to face Jesus. That is why we will all come down from our lonely perches to face the one who loves us and wants us to repent. The story continues to be told.*

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Diamonds in the rough

On the same subject, Jay Cormier writes:

A rabbi devoted many hours working in the ghetto of the city, offering whatever help he could to the homeless and destitute, to alcoholics and addicts. A member of his congregation, a very successful diamond merchant, challenged the rabbi as to why he wasted so much time with lowlifes and crazies.

The rabbi asked the merchant if he had ever thrown out a million-dollar diamond in the rough.

"Never!" the merchant said emphatically. "An expert would know the worth of whatever he held in his hand."

"I'll let you in on a secret, my friend," the rabbi responded softly. "I'm also an expert on diamonds. I walk the street every day, and all I see are the most precious diamonds walking past me. Some of them you have to pick up from the gutter and polish a bit. But once you do, oh how they shine! So, you see, the most important thing you have to know in life is that everyone, everyone, is a diamond in the rough."

In the eyes of God, every man, woman and child is a "diamond" of great value; every one of us possesses a goodness and dignity just by virtue of being created by God. Today's readings speak of God's love for all ("you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things" - Reading 1) and God's unwavering determination to be reconciled with the creation God so lovingly fashioned ("The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost" - Gospel.). As Jesus affirms the honest Zacchaeus in the eyes of his skeptical neighbors, as the humble rabbi reaches out to "polish" the poor and needy of the gutter, so we are called to affirm that "imperishable spirit" of God existing in everyone as a child of God.

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Stick with your weekly holy hour in the chapel

Remaining faithful to the weekly holy hour in the Adoration Chapel is very easy for many of us. We look forward to going even if our prayer time does not seem very fulfilling. Others may struggle with keeping their commitment. If this is true for you, keep the following in mind:

St. Therese, the Little Flower, used to often fall asleep during her holy hour in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. This upset her very much until Jesus appeared to her and said: *"Do you remember what your father said to you when you were a little girl and fell asleep in his lap?"* Therese answered that her father would say that he enjoyed her just as much when she fell asleep in his lap as when she was awake talking to him. Jesus answered: *"It is the same with me."*

Point: Even when Therese was asleep in the chapel, she was growing in holiness. When we spend time in God's presence seeking to grow in his love, we can be sure we are touched in some way. Also, remember these beautiful words of St. Paul in 2Cor 3:18.

***All of us gazing upon the Lord
are being transformed and
being made into his image and likeness.***

Have a blessed week,

