

## ***Two Kinds of Sinners***

In the name of him who came to seek and to save the lost, dear friends in Christ: Lost. That's how the Scriptures describe sinners in rebellion who are not in communion with the Lord God. Lost in life in time, and lost for all eternity if not rescued; if not found, redeemed, and restored to proper fellowship with God. The thing of it is, those who are lost cannot find and restore themselves; which is why it's the Lord's goal to find and recover them before it's too late.

Speaking of lost sinners, today's Scripture readings describe two different kinds of them. The first kind is represented in the person Zacchaeus the chief tax collector in the Judean city of Jericho. We aren't told a lot about him, but from what we do know it's not hard to fill in some details. He's Jewish. We can tell that from his Hebrew name which quite ironically means "pure" or "innocent" because he is anything but that. But because he is Jewish, we can safely surmise that he was raised in good Jewish fashion, that he was taught what it means to be a true son of Abraham, to include the Law of Moses and the history of God's gracious dealings with his chosen people Israel. When he was 12 or 13, he would have stood and read from the Scriptures in the synagogue at his Bar Mitzvah, confessed his faith in the coming Messiah, sworn lifelong fidelity to the Lord, and thus have become a "son of the covenant" that God made with his chosen people Israel.

We know further that he was of small stature, which may help explain why it was that somewhere along the line things in his life took a radical change for the worse. I suspect that if he were alive today he might be diagnosed with what's called "Little Man Syndrome", also known as "Napoleon Syndrome". It happens when someone, due to their small size, feels inferior, powerless, and insecure in society. And so they compensate by taking whatever measures are necessary to acquire the very things they feel they lack, namely authority and power over others. Zacchaeus found what he was looking for in doing what no self-respecting Jew would ever do: he went to work for the hated Romans as one of their tax collecting agents, men who enriched themselves and the despised conquerors by bleeding their countrymen dry. Apparently he was good at it, because he had risen in the ranks of the Roman Revenue Service (RRS) to become a *chief* tax collector. It means he contracted directly with the Roman authorities for a large region which he then divided into smaller precincts and then subcontracted to other Jewish tax collectors who did the actual dirty work of spying on, assessing, and shaking down the unhappy tax payers. Of course, he took his cut off the top of each one on his subcontracted collectors' proceeds.

This helps explain something else we know about Zacchaeus. He was rich; quite literally filthy, stinking rich because it's well known that the assessments and methods used by the tax collectors were anything but honest. He was likely the richest man in the city. Where most of his countrymen lived in comparative squalor in crowded apartments, Zacchaeus would have had a lavish villa in the best neighborhood with all the amenities: fountains, gardens, marble baths, servants to attend his every whim, and armed guards to keep him safe and secure.

Zacchaeus would have felt that security necessary, because if he was the richest man in town, he was also the most thoroughly hated. His fellow Jews considered him a traitor to God and to country, as well as a vile, bloodsucking leech. The Roman authorities would have viewed him pretty much the same, but as a necessary evil to have in their employ.

And so I give you Zacchaeus: the kind of sinner who sins openly, boldly, thumbing his nose at God and man, greedily enriching himself and all the rest of you be damned.

Zacchaeus used illicit and shameful means to acquire everything he thought he wanted: great wealth, power over others, a life of luxury, and because everyone knew who he was, even a certain amount of fame (though infamy may better describe it). The trouble is that having acquired all that, he found that it wasn't enough. Yes, people feared him because with a word he could ruin them; but no one respected him. And while he had many people around him all the time, servants and tax collectors under him who jumped to obey his commands, he had no real friends. No one genuinely loved or trusted him. And then, because of his religious upbringing, there was this constant feeling of anxiety in the back of his mind. He tried to suppress it, but it never quite went away: the knowledge that it wasn't just people he was out of sorts with, but with the Lord God, and one day there would be consequences to pay.

But how does one fix that? You can't go back and erase the past. What's done is done. And the bridges he might have crossed to get back where he belonged were burned a long time ago. And too, it would be very difficult to give up the cushy life he'd become accustomed to. There's something to be said for the pleasures of sin: they're fun while they last. No, with respect to getting his life back on track where it belonged with both God and man, Zacchaeus felt that he was up a tree, so to speak.

And then one day he heard about Jesus, the miracle working Rabbi from Galilee. Ever since, he's been following the reports of his ministry quite closely. Amazing things. Why, if even half of what he's heard is true, then this Jesus is truly something remarkable. What's intrigued him most is that Jesus is said to be a friend of sinners, a Rabbi who won't turn you away or condemn you because of your shameful past. He preaches a Gospel of forgiveness, reconciliation, and inclusion. It's said that one of his chosen disciples is a former tax collector. Zacchaeus thinks that maybe there is some hope for a guy like me. It's a nice thought, anyway.

Next comes the word that Jesus is going to be passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. A close friend of his named Lazarus who lived near there has died. Apparently Jesus is going to pay his final respects. (Well, something like that.) Zacchaeus doesn't imagine for a moment that someone like Jesus will give him the time of day, but he wants at least to get a glimpse of him – sort of like the woman with the flow of blood who only wanted to touch the hem of his garment, but not quite that forward. He's not used to rubbing shoulders with his fellow citizens. He's uncomfortable in their company, and for good reason. And because of his small stature, he can't see over the crowd that's assembled to see Jesus and his entourage pass through the city. He elects to climb up into a tree – both to keep his distance from other people and to give himself a better look at Jesus.

But what's worth noting is what the Scriptures say about people in trees. After criminals were executed, they were sometimes placed on public display as a warning to others – at least until sunset when they had to be taken down and buried. Thus it says in the Law of Moses, "Cursed is he who hangs from a tree." And that, of course, exactly describes Zacchaeus: he's a man cursed by both God and man. What's more, he knows it. And he doesn't see any way out of it.

Fortunately for him, Jesus does. Seeing Zacchaeus on his perch on a branch, he surprises everyone by inviting him to come down the tree – and then, even more surprising, by inviting himself over to Zacchaeus' home for dinner. Friend of sinners indeed. No, more than a friend, a reconciler of sinners. A redeemer of sinners. A changer of sinners. And most

importantly, a substitute for sinners. In less than two weeks, it will be Jesus on the tree, cursed by man and by God, despised, suffering and dying for a world of sinners like Zacchaeus (and you and me).

Zacchaeus, for his part, having received the welcome and forgiveness of the Savior is a changed man. He vows to repay fourfold anyone he's wronged, and to give half of his present worth and future income to benefit the poor. Jesus and all the angels of heaven rejoice that salvation has come to this formerly lost sinner.

But not everyone is happy. There is grumbling in the crowd. "Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner!" These represent the second kind of sinner presented in this morning's Scriptures. And they are tougher nut to crack because they don't see themselves as sinners. No, they see themselves as good, honest, hardworking, church going people. They are the self righteous sinners. They would never do the kind of things Zacchaeus has done. They are far above that. And even if he does what he's promised, if he repays them with interest and gives to the poor, they will never forgive him or welcome him into their company. No, not a sinner like him.

These are the kind sinners Isaiah speaks of in today's Old Testament reading. The practice of their religion is all show. They honor the Lord with their lips and sacrifices, but their hearts are far from him. The Lord accuses them of doing nothing more than wearing out the floor of his temple. He judges their worship, their offerings, and their acts of piety to be offensive. He tells them they can pray all they want, but he's not going to listen to them.

But he does have an invitation for them. Like he says to Zacchaeus, he invites them to come down off the high horse of their own self righteousness. Come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. And they too will change. Forgiven, washed clean of sin by Jesus, they will do good, seek justice, and be charitable to the poor and needy. They will forgive even as they have been forgiven. These are the genuine acts of worship that please the Lord.

So, two kinds of sinners ... I guess the question is: which kind are you? I hope you can see that answer is both. And that, in turn, should make you want to be the third and best kind of sinner, that is, a sinner who humbly receives Jesus and his work of salvation. May it be true of all of us, now and always. In Jesus' name.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***