

Fr. Romeo Evangelista's Homily  
November 3, 2019  
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

The Jews in Jesus' time were burdened by state and religious taxes. State taxes were paid to Rome. Herodian rulers imposed direct taxes on land properties and individuals (head taxes). Moreover, indirect taxes were imposed on transit trade and market exchange. On the other hand, religious taxes were paid to the Jerusalem Temple: head and land taxes for the support of the priests; and taxes for sacrificial offerings and vows.

And to collect taxes they need partners and hired laborers. They called it "brokers" or "tax collectors". Taxes were usually overpriced for the brokers to recover their "capital" and have profits. Zacchaeus had bought the "right" to collect taxes in Jericho and was successful in his "business" thus becoming a wealthy man. But all of that changed when he encountered the Lord Jesus.

The story of Zacchaeus is a curious one. He was hated. His own people most likely avoided him. His work of collaboration with foreign invaders (the Romans) must have made him the man to watch and be wary of. His job necessitated some degree of gall and composure, for it demanded that he deliver, never mind people's feelings about it.

But for all his emotional callousness, Zacchaeus was a curious man. He was anxious to see what kind of person Jesus was. He was resourceful too. Short in stature but not necessarily short in practical intelligence, he probably stepped on some paid servant's back and climbed a sycamore tree. And the rest, mind you, is not history but an unfolding mystery of a life-changing encounter.

But if Zacchaeus did the unexpected, Jesus did the unthinkable. He told Zacchaeus to come down—and more! He invited himself to Zacchaeus's house. The result was instantaneous. Zacchaeus was star-struck. Shallow curiosity initially led him to take a look at

the passing emerging celebrity. Mere interest led to an interpersonal encounter. Curiosity was met by an act of personal engagement. “Hurry down for I must stay in your house”.

With the story of Zacchaeus we are reminded that with our willingness to make the first step, God will surely create extraordinary things in our life.

Sometimes we think that it is up to God to do everything for us. After all, He has all the power, all the love, and all the compassion. He owes it to us to forgive us. We often expect a God who is involved in our daily cares and troubles, even if we never engage Him—not in prayer, not in the liturgy, not anywhere. Zacchaeus, it turns out, had the better sense. He took a concrete step. He may have paid and used people, but he did try to get to the best seat in the roving theater of God’s merciful and saving love. He took his perch and saw the man who soon took the bluff and engaged him: “Hurry down!”

Prayer is being engaged with God and being open to encounter. One needs to take that crucial first step—look for Him. Zacchaeus did, and was changed by the power of God.

With what is happening in the world and in our church today, Zacchaeus’s story gives us hope, that as long as there are people willing to make the first step, to change, God will surely be there to accompany them.

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost”.