

Wisdom 11:22; Ps 144: Thess 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-9

Is it too early to have a Christmas homily? I went into a pub during the week and as expected all the Halloween decorations were out, but also, there on a table, bedecked with cobwebs and pumpkins was an advertisement encouraging me to book my table for Christmas, along with a copy of the mouth-watering menu. I declined the offer. As I strolled away down the street I was stopped from bemoaning the fact that the shops begin selling Christmas earlier and earlier by the realisation that none of them started as early as I did! In fact I celebrate Christmas multiple times a day throughout the year as I pray the Angelus morning, afternoon and evening, or another suitable Marian prayer. So the shops have nothing on me as far as Christmas marketing!

The Christmas message is in the last line of today's Gospel: *'For the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.'* This is the Christmas message of Jesus in the manger and Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, the chief tax-collector. Just as it is startling to learn that God has become a man, with a flesh and blood just like us, and that he did so by being born in poverty and obscurity, so it is startling to hear who God wishes to save, and who wishes to be saved.

The encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus is like Christmas. Just before it in Luke's gospel, is the encounter between Jesus and the rich man, chapter 18: 15-35. Here a local ruler, asks *'Good Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?'* Jesus tells him to obey the commandments, which

the man assures him he does. Then Jesus says to him *'One thing remains, sell everything you possess. Give it to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven.. And come, follow me!'* Are we surprised that the man turns away sorrowful because Jesus seems to be asking too much from him? Maybe it is too close to home for us to be comfortable. To all appearances the local ruler is a good man, and he probably is a 'good man', but he cannot turn his good life over to God.

After this encounter, Jesus tells a parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector which we heard last week and which Deacon Andrew spoke about. The Pharisee appears good, but wants to be praised by men. The tax-collector appears bad to men, but seeks forgiveness from God. The tax-collector is the one who is accepted by God.

And now, today, the parable seems to have anticipated a real-life encounter between Jesus and a tax-collector named Zacchaeus. However, we should not be too hasty to make them directly analogous. If we looked just at the wrapping paper then to all appearances Zacchaeus is not a good man, although he is prosperous like the ruler Jesus encountered earlier. As a tax collector his connection with the Roman occupiers is far too close to make him anything less than loathed by his fellow Jews. Like the wealthy ruler he is intrigued by Jesus. But unlike the ruler he does not dare approach Jesus directly, he climbs a tree to see him. He stands 'far off', a little like the tax collector in Jesus' parable. However, here, the image is faintly humorous and quite consoling: Zacchaeus has the curiosity of a child, and as we will discover, the earnestness of one as well.

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When Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus and tells to come down from the tree for *'I must stay in your house today!'*, the people around him grumble and mumble about 'sinners' and 'tax-collectors' and I imagine 'Jesus is supposed to be a prophet.' kind of comment. And now here is where Zacchaeus differs from the rich ruler who walks away from Jesus. Zacchaeus, in that child-like earnestness that I spoke of earlier, declares to Jesus that he already shares half his possessions with the poor and that if he finds out he has cheated anyone, he restores it four-fold. There is no reason to doubt this is true, if it were not Jesus would soon have said. So why does Jesus not tell Zacchaeus that he has to give it all away if he wants to be his disciple? I suspect that it is because Zacchaeus is already detached from his wealth. It does not hinder him, unlike the wealthy ruler. Nor is Zacchaeus in need of the deep forgiveness that the other Tax-collector senses he needs in our Lord's parable. What Zacchaeus needs and receives from Jesus is something different. It is restitution – a type of healing - to his rightful place in the house of Israel, in his own understanding and in the understanding of those who look on and judge falsely. That is what God gives and what Zacchaeus accepts, it is the order of his salvation, his Christmas gift. And the star burns brightly over the manger; *'For the Son of man has come to seek and to save what was lost.'*¹

¹ Luke 19:10