

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

I love the story of Zacchaeus that we just heard. One of the reasons I love it so much, is because it's so easy to get a visual on what's going on here. We have Zacchaeus, who wanted to see Jesus, so he climbed up into a sycamore tree. I imagine this short man scurrying up the tree. Now, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but I'm not sure Zacchaeus wanted Jesus to see him. Just listen to the words of the Gospel again: Zacchaeus "was **seeking** to **see** who Jesus was; but he could not **see** him because of the crowd... So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to **see** Jesus." It sounds to me like he wanted to **see** without **being seen**.

And, with good reason, for as we hear Zacchaeus was "the chief tax collector and also a wealthy man". In case you're not familiar, tax collectors at this time were despised by the Jewish people because they not only added a surcharge to the amount imposed by the Roman government to line their own pockets, but they also represented the unwelcome occupying presence of the Roman empire.

But, try as he might to hide, Zacchaeus' cover gets blown. In fact, when Jesus comes to where Zacchaeus is hiding, He looks up, calls this man by name, and asks Him to come down, telling him that He must stay at his house that day. You can just picture this whole story unfolding.

The other reason I like this story so much is because of the conversation that unfolds once Zacchaeus comes back to earth. And whatever took place in Zacchaeus in those few feet from the tree branch to the ground, it resulted in a miraculous conversion almost on the spot. The proof? Zacchaeus promised to give back, not just the extra money he heaped on top, but up to **four** times that which he stole from others. He promised to return all that money that led him to lead such a greedy lifestyle.

Now sure, some people might argue, well of course he did such a thing. After all, he was exposed by Jesus – caught red-handed. So, in order to save his own face, he had a convenient “change of heart”. But, I don’t think it was that at all.

According to the Catholic Dictionary, a conversion is “any turning or changing from a state of sin to repentance, from unbelief to faith”. But what led to Zacchaeus’ conversion? A conversation. It was a conversation between Zacchaeus and Jesus that led to his amazing conversion. What’s the difference between “conversion” and “conversation”? Just two letters – A T! And, AT that time, the intimate conversation that Zacchaeus and Jesus had melted his heart, and led him to repent of his former way of life. And Jesus confirms all this, for He declares: “Today salvation has come to this house...For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”

So, what if you were hiding up in that tree – wanting to see Jesus, but a little sheepish because of what He might say to you as a result of what He knows about your life, whether public or private? But hiding is not the way to freedom. Rather, having a deep personal conversation with Jesus is the way to conversion for us – turning from our sins and belonging completely to Him. And the best part of the Zacchaeus story, which I didn't even mention yet, is what Zacchaeus' name means. Literally, the name Zacchaeus means "pure" or "clean". Now, if we heard that at the beginning of the story, we might have laughed, because this tax collector and sinner was anything but pure or clean. And yet, it's because of the conversation that Jesus has with Zacchaeus that enables his conversion so he can become who God intended this descendent of Abraham to always be.

In some ways, I think we're all up in that tree, not wanting to be fully exposed for what we've done. And yet, if we take the risk and become vulnerable before Jesus, we can let Him wash us clean of our sins so that we can be pure. We are not our sins, we are children of God. And Jesus' mercy makes us so – washed clean by the Blood of the Lamb.

Now, given that the election is barely a week away, I was also thinking to myself, what would Jesus say to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump if He found them hiding up in that sycamore tree. Sure, we might think of what we would like Him to chastise them for. But, Jesus desires their conversion too.

As I was having a conversation with a friend the other day about these political candidates, the other person was scoffing about Mr. Trump's so-called "pro-life" stance, saying that he actually used to be pro-choice or pro-abortion. This person kind of thought Mr. Trump's "conversion" on the issue was akin to the phony understanding of Zacchaeus', in that, as I said, it was somehow politically advantageous and convenient for him to do so. However, conversion is what it's all about – at least that's God's perspective. And it was just the other day on EWTN that Mr. Trump was interviewed by Raymond Arroyo about this very topic, to which Mr. Trump explained his own change of heart. He talked about close friends of his, a married couple, who were expecting their first child. One wanted to have the child, and the other wanted to abort him or her. In the end they ended up having the baby after all. Now, all those years later, that friend, who once was pro-abortion, is now pro-life.

My friends, people can change for the better. That's the story of Zacchaeus, that's the story here of Donald Trump, and I pray on this issue that it could somehow become the story of Hillary Clinton and her political party, which support the innocent killing of children in the womb. But, it's also God's invitation for this to be our story too. It all begins with a conversation. And I pray this conversation starter today will get you thinking about your own conversion – personally; in terms of how you live; even in terms of how you vote. Jesus' bottom line here is not to criticize, to embarrass, or to harass, but rather it's to save lives. And that's my purpose too. God bless you.