

First one tax collector and then another - what's going on?

Last week we read the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, and this week we read the story of Zacchaeus, another tax collector and a senior one at that! The first one, through his prayer is justified; the second one through his encounter with Jesus is saved. The two incidents form a set of “bookends” framing a series of events revealing for us an insight which we all should look to understand. The lectionary omits this material, so when you get home, it's worth picking up your copy of Luke's Gospel and following his narrative.

After last week's parable, Jesus tells us that we are to welcome the kingdom of God with the mindset of a little child; i.e. a mindset that harbours no prejudice towards anyone (including tax collectors), yet which at the same time, is open and honest and above all trusting. One of the rulers of the community, no doubt someone in a position of authority, then asks Jesus what he must do to inherit this kingdom, Jesus tells him not only must he keep the commandments (a la Pharisee), but as well as just keeping them, he must really live them, and to do this will inevitably involve him in great sacrifice (which for this person entails giving away all he owns). It's all too much for him, and he can't accept it because he was very rich. Jesus bemoans how we cling to our material wealth, placing our trust and salvation in what we possess, as oppose to placing our trust in the all embracing salvific love of God. Hearing this, Peter is shocked, he can't understand what's happening, after all he and the disciples consider that they have sacrificed everything. What more does Jesus expect? The answer comes in the form of the third prediction of the passion. It comes as a rejoinder and a sobering one at that, as the sacrifice Jesus will offer will be his body and blood. This is the reality into which Jesus is about to enter and its meaning is lost on Peter.

The Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is the reality by which our salvation is gained, the certainty through which our eyes are opened and our faith affirmed. The blind beggar, who Jesus next encounters at the side of the road, in spite of his blindness “sees” Jesus as the one who can save him and he asks for his sight with the same plea as the miserable tax collector. Like the tax collector, the blind man understands his need for mercy and in doing so he gains his reward. We now hear the story of Zacchaeus and with our sight restored, we recognise the mystery of salvation rendered once more in the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus.

The mystery of our salvation, brought about through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is present in all of us. It is revealed when we see through eyes that have been opened to this presence. This process begins when we acknowledge our need of God's love and mercy, and begin to live out this love as Jesus himself calls us to. It means being prepared to sacrifice ourselves in ways we had never contemplated. It means being prepared to accept the way of the cross as the pathway through which God's love is revealed. It is hard to understand, particularly when we feel too much is being demanded. It is perhaps in these moments of crisis that our eyes are truly opened, and we *recognise him in the breaking of bread* and he “stays” with us in our home in this most mysterious and beautiful of ways. *Today salvation has come to this house.* Let these words ring true for us.