

JMJ CHS October 30, 2022. 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

I have always enjoyed the story of Zacchaeus. When I was a little kid in church, to hear of somebody climbing up a tree, well that would have captured the imagination of any little boy. I liked to climb trees myself. Probably even had a tree house somewhere along the line.

The other detail about him that I find interesting was that he was described as a man of short stature. Today, some would probably call him “vertically challenged”, or even a shrimp. Many look down on short people (no pun intended). But there is a bit of a stigma attached to shortness. Totally unjustified, of course, it's just one more example of the prejudices that many of us have. You might remember Randy Newman who once wrote a song called Short People (with the refrain, *they have no reason to live*). Even though it was a spoof, a satire, it didn't help matters because many people took him literally.

Now I have never really considered myself short. I would have liked a few more inches, but as it stands, I'm really pretty average. I'm actually at the upper limit of the lower percentiles of overall heights. My Michigan driver's license lists me as 5'8". But that was then. This is now. I checked for shrinkage the other day, my back up against the wall, with a tape measure. I had lost a full 3 inches. 73 years of gravity has taken its toll.

But I was curious. Who are the famously short people out in our world? Well, without even checking, I knew that Mother Teresa was a shorty. She topped out at a whopping 5 feet 0 inches. That's pretty short. But how about some famous men? Of the extensive list I checked, 5'8" would have been, again, at the top of the list. In my younger days I would have been able to look Ulysses S. Grant right in the eye. And I would have been able to look down on a lot of other people, like Tom Cruise, the Rev. Martin Luther King and Winston Churchill. All at 5'7. Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, and Bob Dylan were 5 foot 6. That's my current height. In a class by himself is actor Elijah Wood who played Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. In real life he is 5'5". But Frodo, the hobbit, is listed at 3' foot 6". Pablo Picasso and Michael J. Fox at 5'4". Finally, near the very bottom of the list, the famous composer and musician, Ludwig Van Beethoven, at a lowly 5'3". He probably had to tape some blocks to the pedals of his piano.

I think the ultimate truth about all of these people is that big things frequently come in small packages. And that we should never “look down” on them, for any reason whatsoever. It's just another one of our senseless biases that plague us in life.

But, as for Zacchaeus in today's Gospel, we should remember him not for his lack of height, but for the fact that he was given a great gift. He was granted his salvation that day at the foot of a sycamore tree and some reflection on the passage certainly gives us an idea of how important that encounter was.

First, there is a safe presumption, based on the details of his confession, that he was something less than an honorable man. He was wealthy, and a chief tax collector. And

that means that he, just like Matthew, was despised. He was considered a traitor because he worked for Rome. Thus, he was an outcast among God's Chosen People. And, another presumption was that he was a dishonest man. A sinner.

But what did it take for him to change so completely and so quickly? It had to be a grace from below. That is, Jesus looking up to him in the tree, inviting himself over to Zaccheus's house. That's all it took. Push the "easy button". As the story goes, Zaccheus immediately repents and promises to change his ways and to make amends for those he has already cheated or hurt. And he was granted a blessing right then and there when Jesus said, "*Today, salvation has come to this house*".

Conversions come in many different shapes and sizes. And more often than not, it does not take place in a moment, but is rather a process. Even for those of us who are born into the Church, we are baptized and receive the other sacraments over the course of the years. But salvation is not necessarily permanent. It is not guaranteed by any of these things. Scripture makes it very clear in many places that "*Not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. But only those who do the will of my Father.*"

And so we can lose our salvation. We need to remember the warning of St. Paul who said of himself, "*I work out my salvation in fear and trembling*". So Zaccheus is at the very beginning of his spiritual journey and it takes place in a single event. An instant, a moment of grace. He repents and Jesus welcomes him into his kingdom.

But this story reminds me of the need for repentance among many here in our world. Oh, how neat it would be if it was as quick and easy, and apparently as painless as it was for Mr. Z.

It has been a while since I've talked about that book called *The Warning, Testimonies and Prophecies of The Illumination of Conscience*, by Christine Watkins. She is a mystic from California who goes around the country talking about "*a time to come*", sooner or later, when the Lord, in a last great act of mercy, illuminates the consciences of every person on the planet. All at the same time.

What that means is that every person in the world would simultaneously endure (key word, endure) a God-imposed *examination of conscience*. It will be like seeing a movie of our life flash before our eyes so that we would be able to see ourselves as God sees us. The presumption is that we will not like what we see and, out of fear of losing our salvation, we would fall to our knees, and repent. Just as Zaccheus did.

Christine points out that a *warning* about this particular day came quite early when Jesus said in St. Matthew's gospel, that *a day will come when...signs and wonders will take place in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars*. This will hopefully cause people to come to their senses and repent. But in her book, she also gives many examples throughout history, right up to the present, where people have been granted the special grace to see themselves as they truly are.

At least one example might be helpful. And so why not start with Christine herself. Her conversion does not fit into the category of illumination of conscience but it was nevertheless a gift, freely given to her from God, not unlike the one with Zacchaeus.

Christine was not brought up in the faith. In fact, she eventually called herself an atheist and looked down on all Christians with condescension, and great disdain. Her “god”, she said, was a special talent. She was a talented ballerina and she advanced to the point where she danced with the San Francisco Ballet. But a foot injury brought her career to an end. And then soon thereafter she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She was in the depths of despair and cried out to, to whatever, to whomever.

But, the *One True God* answered her, and healed her, and saved her. Salvation had come to her house, as it did with Zacchaeus. And now that she sees clearly, she is something like St. Paul, as she goes around the country on missionary journeys to share the *good news* about The Warning.

Well, it sounds like good news to me. I am reasonably confident and hopeful that the warning experience will not be that painful for me. I am, after all, a Priest. I mean, I hope I have completely repented. And I do utilize the sacrament of confession. But, who knows, maybe I will be required to actually see the ramifications of some of the things that I did in my Youth and stupidity. In other words, how has my personal behavior negatively affected the world?

Well, OK, I guess I do have some deep concerns after all. But I am also presuming that I will need to get over it rather quickly because my services will be required in the confessional.

Even though Christine, with her special insights, believes that not everybody will repent, nevertheless I would expect the confession lines to be quite long. So I had better prepare myself for that long day to come. And I hope it comes quickly. As I look out over the landscape and see what we all see, how could I, or you, or any good Christian, want any more delay.

So, Maranatha, come quickly, Lord Jesus. And in your great mercy, intervene in our lives in the same way you intervened in the life of Zacchaeus, and St. Paul, and Christine, so that the scales will fall from our eyes, that we might see clearly and respond like they did; to repent and to make amends for all the harm we have done along the way.

And remember, that for those of you who may not be in that much need of repentance, after your confession, you will be the ones who will be called upon to be mentors, and escorts, and greeters, welcoming some very shook up people to our church, advising them as to what they have just endured, and then leading them to me, in the confessional.

~Fr. John