

The Sunday of Zacchaeus

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today brothers and sisters in Christ, we heard the wonderful story of Zacchaeus in a Gospel reading which vividly paints the beautiful picture of repentance and salvation. And, as we may know, this Gospel reading signifies for us the coming of Great Lent, as this Sunday reading is the first of a short series of Sunday readings meant to prepare us for this season of salvific repentance.

And so, today as we look ahead and see the Great Fast on our horizon, we know that there is a difficult struggle before us. Yet, today the Church also gives us hope and consolation, as we see the Lord bring salvation to Zacchaeus and all his household as He makes His way to Jerusalem to offer Himself up for us men and our salvation.

The story of Zacchaeus is well known by all, even though it only appears in the Gospel of St. Luke.

Zacchaeus, was a chief tax-collector, who wanted to see Jesus, Who was passing by that way. And being short of stature and unable to see Christ through the crowd, he climbed into a sycamore tree. Then when the Lord saw Zacchaeus, He called him by name, and told him that today, he must welcome Him into his home.

To this Zacchaeus responded joyfully, but when the crowds murmured saying that Jesus “has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner”, Zacchaeus arose and offered repentance to the Lord saying, “Behold, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore it fourfold.”

And seeing the change in Zacchaeus’s heart the Lord proclaimed, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Now let us consider three things regarding the repentance offered by Zacchaeus, which might be of benefit to us as we prepare to enter the Lenten season.

First, Zacchaeus had a great desire to see Christ. In the Orthodox Patristic tradition, the vision of Christ in glory is synonymous with man’s deification, his union with God – in other words, in the tradition of the Church, to see Christ as He truly is, the Lord of glory, is the goal of the Christian life.

This vision is not merely with the physical eyes, but also with the eyes of the soul, man’s spiritual sight. Such a vision of Christ is the most authentic and deepest desire of all human beings, whether they know it or not. Zacchaeus, however, did know this, and he was taken over by this holy desire to see Christ.

This brings us to our second point. Zacchaeus's desire to see Christ led him to action. In spiritual terms, we call this asceticism. One could only imagine how difficult it must have been for Zacchaeus, being a man of short stature, to physically climb up into the sycamore tree. However, the greatness of this ascetical feat pales in comparison to the struggle he undoubtedly underwent to cast aside his pride and humiliate himself before the crowds.

The third and final point of consideration, regarding the repentance of Zacchaeus, is perhaps the most important. After Zacchaeus's desire to see Christ had led him to climb the tree, which as we have said was an act of asceticism done in humility; and after the Lord had told him that he must receive Him into his house; Zacchaeus, convicted more by his conscience than the murmuring of the crowds, cast aside his love of money, and purged the sin of greed from his heart, choosing to give away half of his possessions to the poor and making fourfold restitution to those he had defrauded. This decisive act of repentance allowed the Lord to not only enter the home of Zacchaeus but also his heart, bringing salvation to him and all his household.

Now, let us say something more concerning the four-fold restitution offered by Zacchaeus to those he had defrauded.

According to the Mosaic Law, restitution for stolen property was normally only required with the addition of a fifth but, as we read in Leviticus, if a sheep were to be stolen then restitution was to be offered fourfold. Now certainly, Zacchaeus, as a chief tax collector, was not in the business of literally stealing sheep, so we do well to understand his fourfold restitution in another way.

Christ Himself says that He has come to seek and to save that which was lost, and elsewhere He says that He was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As we learn from the Gospel account, Zacchaeus himself was a such a man, for he was a Jew, a member of the chosen flock of God, the house of Israel, but Zacchaeus strayed from the flock, wandering away into a life of greed and deception.

One can clearly see Zacchaeus's separation from his fellow Jews in that he was forced to climb a tree in order to see Jesus, for the crowds were unwilling to let Zacchaeus, this man of short stature, close enough to see Christ because they detested him, not because he was a short man but because he was a man of little character.

However, the Lord, the Chief Shepherd, saw Zacchaeus and called him back into His fold, accepting from him the restitution offered for a sheep stolen away by greed, for through avarice Zacchaeus had stolen himself from the flock of God.

Finally, let us compare the person of Zacchaeus to three other thieves we encounter during our Lord's Passion week. For as St. John Chrysostom teaches, one who acquires wealth through injustice is no different than a common thief.

First, let us recall the case of the man who used to steal from the money bag, a man who like Zacchaeus climbed a tree, but a man who climbed the tree, not to see Jesus, but rather in order to hang himself because he could not bear to look at the Christ, whom he had betrayed. This man, as we know, was Judas Iscariot and his sin was threefold, first greed, then betrayal, and finally the worst of all sins, despair.

Now we encounter the other two thieves when our Lord is crucified on Golgotha. Both of these thieves climbed their respective trees, or rather crosses. And both of these thieves there encountered Christ, the Lord of glory. The one confessed his sins, received remission and entered into Paradise, while the other, reviled the Lord and perished for his blasphemy.

For us brothers and sisters in Christ, the message is very clear. The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost, and this means each and every one of us, for we all have, at one time or another, been lost through sin.

And so, as we begin our journey with the Lord to Jerusalem, where He, the Good Shepherd, will lay down His life for His sheep, let us resolve to offer restitution for what we have stolen from Him. For truly when we wander away from the Good Shepherd and fall into sin through passionate attachments, evil desires, and sinful actions, we steal ourselves away from His flock. So let us resolve to return to His flock by casting every sinful passion out of our hearts, as Zacchaeus cast out his greed through the reproaches of both his fellow Jews and his own conscience.

This return to Christ entails willingly climbing our trees, ascending our crosses, all the time maintaining a fervent desire to see the Lord, the vision of whom comes only through our own humiliation and inner purification.

And when faced with the weight of our own sins and the severity of our own passions, let us not give in to despair as did Judas, nor blasphemy as the unwise thief, but let us take to ourselves the firm resolve of Zacchaeus who changed his ways, and the humble confession of the wise thief who entered into Paradise.

For only in this way can we receive Christ into the home of our hearts and only then will we hear from Him the words, "Today salvation has come to your house, because you also are a son of Abraham; for I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and to save that which was lost."

To our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, be the glory, together with His Father who is without beginning and His All-holy, Good, and Life-giving Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!