



Sunday, January 22, 2012 Sunday of Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1-10

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

Brothers and Sisters, because of the Gospel reading appointed for the Liturgy this morning, today is called, in the Orthodox lectionary, the Sunday of Zacchaeus. Each year this is actually an “early warning signal”—for the Sunday that follows it is the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, and *that* is the first of the preparatory Sundays that will lead us into the Holy Season the Great Fast, Lent.

The Apostle Zacchaeus was a rich publican, or tax collector, at Jericho. Since he was short of stature, he climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Christ passing by. He became a disciple of the Lord and after the Lord’s Ascension into Heaven, and he accompanied St. Peter on his missionary travels, eventually becoming the first bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. So, he was an Apostle of the Seventy. His Feast Day is April 20, the day of his holy death.

By paying attention this morning to the Gospel account concerning Zacchaeus, we learn that our own Lenten journey must begin with an increased awareness of our own sinfulness and unworthiness, just as St. Zacchaeus, before the Lord, recognized his own sins, promising to make restitution by giving half of his wealth to the poor and by paying to those he had falsely accused four times as much as they had lost. In this, he actually went beyond the requirements of the Law.

The late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of London, in a sermon he preached about the Sunday of Zacchaeus, had a very different and interesting “take” on this Gospel.

“Today’s Gospel,” he said, “is about vanity and about the way in which it can be overcome, indeed about the condition and the cost of it. Zacchaeus was a rich man, a man, known in his town, a man whom everyone would recognize; he was a man of unrighteous ways, and yet something stirred within him when he heard of Christ and he wanted to see Him. It probably was to a certain extent the desire to see the New Prophet of Israel, but this would not have been enough to prompt him to do what he did. In the crowd, because he was too small of stature, he climbs into a tree; sure, he was surrounded with laughter, with mockery and yet, he so wanted to see Christ, it mattered so much to him to see Him, that he was prepared to be mocked, laughed at rather than

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let Him pass by. And in all this crowd through which Christ was passing, Christ saw only one man: Zacchaeus, and He called him down, and He went to stay with him.”

Metropolitan Anthony continues--and this is very important for us to pay close attention to--:

“Vanity is that condition of our soul, that miserable condition of our soul, in which we are afraid of human judgment, in which we derive our sense of worth from the judgment of those who surround us, and indeed it is vanity, because the things for which we are praised are vain, empty, unworthy of the greatness of man. And also, for praise we do not turn to those people capable of a sound and at times severe judgment; we turn to the people who are ready to offer us the praises which we want. This makes these praises doubly vain, its substance is naught, because the fact is that the people from whom we receive it are also empty, in our own eyes, unless they speak well of us, aren’t they?”

Thus, St John Climacus says that vanity is the attitude of one who is afraid of men and is arrogant before the face of God, who thinks God's judgment matters little, provided that he has the approval of those who surround him.”

You know, this is a remarkably clear and fresh explanation of vanity, and it is drawn from the Gospel of the sinful publican, Zacchaeus, who never minded the laughter and mocking of the crowd around him as he climbed the tree in order to see the Lord. Normally we think of vanity as being concerned about how we look, how we dress, etc.—and this is, in fact, vanity, too, of course. But here this good bishop has just given us a richer and deeper understanding of the sin or vice of vanity, and this lesson is well worth remembering, especially when we are examining our consciences at night and in preparation for the Sacrament of Confession, because the fact is that we often forget that what is needed is the esteem and good judgment of God, not the esteem of other people—and not even our *own* self-esteem, either! Zacchaeus--this really quite wretched Scrooge—showed us that we must forget about the good opinions of others who may praise us and seek, rather, to see and know the Lord Jesus Christ.

[Metropolitan Anthony continues:] “St John Climacus says to us that the way to get rid of vanity is humility....The way of humility is that of bowing before the judgment of God. If we are incapable of soaring

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Godwards, lie before Him like the parched earth is before the face of the sky, abandoned, helpless, thirsty, hungry, longing, desperate not to be able to achieve what we wish to achieve, this is the beginning of humility.”

But perhaps that’s too much, too dramatic for us, because we aren’t used to trusting God and abandoning ourselves to His providence and care. In that case, we can just offer ourselves, our weakness, frailties and all, to Him each morning and each evening, and thank Him for everything He has done, is doing, and will do for us—and in that way we can start to whittle away at our vanity.

Then, instead of patting ourselves on the back because others like us or think well of us, or because we think well of ourselves, we can be quietly, humbly grateful and be astonished at the goodness God bestows on us, rather than the fact that others might praise us. This makes it possible to be humble in an anonymous way, which is of much greater value in the eyes of God than letting others know what a fine job we are doing. And perhaps, too, we can begin to see that others also are quietly humble and not seeking rewards in this life by means of pats on the back or praise. Is this not the example we see constantly, over and over and over again in the lives of the saints? I remember Fr. Seraphim of Platina, a spiritual son of St. John Maximovitch of San Francisco, saying that he had never known a man who was so serenely indifferent to the opinions of others about him! This is humility; this is the death of vanity; this is “keeping our eyes on the prize” instead of on ourselves or the opinions of others about us.

And all of this, brothers and sisters, is in this morning’s quiet and special example of the publican, Zacchaeus, who actively sought Christ, kept His eyes on Him, and welcomed Him to his home, regardless of what others thought.

Because of this, Zacchaeus achieved salvation; he received the Kingdom of Heaven. He found the “one thing needful.” Brothers and sisters, let us go and do likewise!

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