

Homily. 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time. Year.C. 2/3 November 2019.

Over this last week at daily Mass we've been listening to sections of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. Out of his own experiences Paul, or better, God through him has been teaching us the value of our frailty and weaknesses and how our humanity can be used by God to benefit us and others. At the beginning it all sounds contradictory and odd, but if we think about what we're being taught it comes to make a great deal of sense.

You see, our natural instinct is to correct, rectify, overcome, and if necessary, try to hide our faults and failings so that we seem more normal, acceptable and ordinary. The problem with this plan is that we simply can't carry it off convincingly. Some of our faults are beyond remediation despite our very best efforts, and the ones that we do manage mend or to bury are always sensed lurking just below the surface, unsettling us and others who come to know us well. Yes, we ought do what we can to be better people, to be persons better integrated with deeper integrity. Imagining, however, that we'll ever succeed in perfecting ourselves is just that, an imaginary dream, a false delusion.

Paul proposes a better way, the way of faith in Jesus Christ and the living power of His grace at work in us. He teaches that everything, without any exceptions, works for the good of those who love God, letting Jesus be Lord of their lives. This way means that even the most troubling about us and the worst in us can be used, changed and converted, ending up serving us and others if we'll only allow God into our predicament.

Self-perfecting and mending is a tiring project doomed to frustration and failure, for only the Creator is able to re-create us as God wills into living images of Christ, God's Son. That's why we call Jesus our Saviour. He's the One who saves us by grace, by His self-gift through our faith in Him. As we've heard in tonight/today 2nd reading, it's God who is able to make us worthy of our call, and by God's power alone fulfil all of our desires for goodness, completing all that we have been doing through our faith.

Zacchaeus had many faults, both personal and moral. He was short so the local people made fun of him. He compensated for this, trying to be the big man about Jericho, ingratiating himself with the Romans by taking up the lucrative but unwanted job of being their tax collector. In this way he reasoned he could get his own back on those people who looked down on him, both literally and figuratively. He added to their tax bill, enriching himself into the bargain. He imagines that his power and wealth insulated him from the ridicule of the towns people. But, the problem is it just didn't work out that way. He ended up being more mistrusted and despised by his own people than ever. Eventually he came to know that even his wealth and status had become a poison to the well of his life.

Having heard about Jesus, about what He'd said and done elsewhere, Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree on Jericho's main street in the hope of glimpsing this notable teacher and healer as He passed by. Really, what he was seeking was some light and freedom, some salvation from his self-made mess and isolation. He was not to be disappointed.

His faults and short-comings had set the stage for a break through, a conversion experience, like and every bit as dramatic as was St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. We've all heard what happened next in Zacchaeus' life so I won't bother repeating it. What matters is that it was his weaknesses, weaknesses that he'd tried to overcome and cope with all by himself that set Zacchaeus up for his conversion to Christ and for the turning of his back on cheating and robbing his own people.

In this conversion our Jericho tax collector is a powerful example to us of all things being brought by God to work for our good and the good of others. The only requirement is having some wonder about what might be possible, along with a desire to change if only because the way that we've been trying to do it all by ourselves just isn't working. This means an admission, slowly or perhaps suddenly dawning on us, that we're in deep trouble, unable to heal and make right ourselves. In reality, it's the gift of wise Divine grace within telling us that we need a saviour to save us from ourselves.

With this light breaking in upon us all we need do is turn to the Lord casting ourselves upon His mercy. This is what Zacchaeus and Paul and Peter and countless others did, and what so many still do to this day. Our weaknesses then become our strength, our failures our glory, forever turning us back to the grace of Christ and pushing us into the arms of God's mercy, for as we heard; God is merciful to all overlooking our sins so that we can repent; a lover of life who hates nothing that God has created.