

21st January 2018
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Zacchaeus Sunday

I wonder whether Zacchaeus used to lie awake at night and imagine what his fellow citizens in Jericho thought of him. 'Zakkay' they would have called him in the common tongue, Aramaic - from the biblical Zacharia. He must have wondered what they thought, not least because he had grown so rich. He enjoyed wealth, not just through inheritance; not even through honest, hard toil. He had grown rich by working the tax-gathering system; by extortion, by fraud, by threats, by the abuse of power. As he lay at night in his large, well-appointed town house - perhaps a villa, modeled on the Roman style - reclining in comfort on a soft couch, the doors bolted, his wife, his children, his slaves, fast asleep: was *he* being kept awake at night?

He had friends, no doubt, among the party of the Sadducees: those who ran affairs in Judaea under the Romans; those who controlled the finances of the temple at Jerusalem. But when he went to the market tomorrow, what were the chances that those anti-Roman terrorists, the 'Zealots,' as they were called, might not strike him, armed with their little knives: they press the crowd, a sudden stabbing and he was down, the assassins disappearing into the multitude and yet another collaborator with the Romans was gone. It must have worried him as he lay awake by night.

For Zacchaeus was a publican, operating within the Roman system of 'tax-farming.' Rich men would bid for the contract at an auction. They would pay money to the empire up front, roughly to the value of the possible tax in a region. This so-called 'loan' could earn them interest when the contract ended. Meanwhile, they would collect the tax, hoping at least, to match the money they had sent to Rome. We can see that the publican was motivated to take more than his due in order to be certain a profit. It certainly did not earn them friends among those who paid the tax.

Zacchaeus would have had some strange companions as he lay awake, worrying by night. For Zacchaeus was a religious outcast, as well as a social pariah. Despised by the party of the Pharisees and those zealous for the Law of Moses, who longed for a state governed

by the commandments of God; an earthly Jerusalem, ruled by the pure. His proverbial bed-fellows then, were the sinners, the prostitutes, the adulterers, the leprous, those maimed by life, the demoniacs, Samaritans and, of course, the gentiles. They were all in the same bed.

But if this were the case, what was it that drew Zacchaeus to seek out the face of Christ? He had many desires: a desire to stay rich; a desire to stay alive. But also a strange desire to see the prophet from Nazareth of whom he had heard tell; a wonder-worker, calling sinners into the Kingdom of God and rumoured even to enter their houses and eat with them. Because, alongside his fears and anxieties, Zacchaeus - like anyone, like all of us - craved acceptance; he wanted to fit in; he wanted to be loved.

This was the opportunity, this was the chink in his armour, the gap in his defences, opening up in his very soul: a way through for the grace of God. Somewhere, deep in his psyche there lay the faculty of his conscience. Where would his way of life lead him in the end? Was it possible, just perhaps, that this famous teacher and healer might change *his* life around? So it was that Grace, being the subtle working of the divine, began to draw this hated publican to climb a sycamore tree. For all his sleepless nights, Zacchaeus' soul was in a deep kind of sleep. St Theophan the Recluse, the 19th Century Russian bishop, likened all sinners to people in a deep sleep, unable to wake themselves unless someone intervenes. In other words, we cannot know that we are even in a state of sin unless Grace prompts us, wakes us up, shakes our conscience. "*Awake, you who sleep,*" writes St Paul to the Ephesians, quoting an early hymn. "*Arise from the dead and Christ will give you light.*"

Writing on turning the heart to God, St Theophan says, '*With one who is asleep: first, he wakes up, then he gets up out of bed and finally, he makes up his mind to do something. So also with a sinner who turns towards God and repents: first, he wakes up from the sleep of sin, then he comes to some determination to change and finally he clothes himself in strength for a new life with the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist.*'

All this we see in Zacchaeus and his first action is to come and see: the desire to enquire, to look into *His*, that is, the Lord's face. And his first action, although climbing high, is humbling; it is an undignified action, a demeaning action for one in his position. Grown men in his times, in his culture, did not climb trees. But he is a little man: how else to get above the heaving, turbulent, possibly dangerous crowd. And the result is a new life. Christ comes to his house and he communes with him and there is repentance and reparation and peace. And the rest of the story we know.

Next Sunday we begin the Triodion, the liturgical book of services that leads us through the Great Fast and onto Pascha. Here is the wisdom of Holy Tradition, the wisdom of the fathers, the pastoral wisdom shared in the Church. We know that in this world, from time to time, we too fall asleep again, like the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, despite Christ's exhortation to watch and pray that we enter not into temptation. How often we can pray: *lead us not into temptation*, yet remain oblivious, inattentive to what we are saying!

So it is that we prepare for this change in the way we live; we prepare for taking our part in the ascetic life of the Great Fast but we do so gradually, as the Sundays unfold. We hear of the Publican and the Pharisee: that is, of repentance and of hypocrisy. Of the Prodigal Son and his elder brother: that is to say, coming to our right mind on the one hand and the mind with a sense of indignant entitlement on the other. Of the separation of sheep and goats: a parable of the final Judgement, which shall distinguish those who have born the fruit of change from those content to stay as they are.

The joy of Pascha is a foretaste of the feast of heaven and just as in the parable, where one called to the feast was rejected for not wearing his wedding garment, so how can we enter into that joy unless we first wake up, turn around and change the mind and actions with which we clothe ourselves? We might not need to climb trees to find Christ but we still need to be woken up, roused, shaken, even kicked out of bed. There will be those who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians who, for no just cause, no real excuse, might still be lying in their beds this morning. They are certainly not here!

But we have woken this morning; we have got ourselves here. That is good; that is excellent. But it is still possible to miss what is hidden, as they say, in plain sight.

Do we not see the face of Christ every day? Do we not catch a glimpse of his image several times a day in passing? I mean his holy icon set up in a place of honour, in our homes, our cars, the screen-saver on our computers, our place of work perhaps. And here we are, standing around His principal icon in the temple, the holy gospels, here on the stand before us and on the holy table. We see the face of Christ, just as Zacchaeus did from his Sycamore tree.

What else do we see here, what else perceive, if not the working of His grace; grace constantly going before us, calling us to wake up, to shake off the torpor of our sins. Such is the love of God for man; the man-befriending God, we call Him, the lover of mankind. And yes, that is *all* mankind, for this has to do with more than just us, we who have accepted Christ into our lives, our hearts, our homes. Whilst we are still in this world we are surrounded by those who walk through life as if asleep; yes, they are sleep walking, seemingly alert but only where sin can lead them. Nature itself, God's very Creation, the symbol of His energies, reminds them with each turn of the earth, with each sunrise, to wake up. And we too, who have heeded the promptings of Grace, are called to arouse others, those zombie souls, the living dead.

For Zacchaeus, troubled nights and disturbed sleep were perhaps the conduits of grace. And indeed, we can be the same for those around us. Who knows what or who God can use to unsettle, to shake the atheist out of his delusions! In Church tradition Zacchaeus became a follower of St Peter on his missionary journeys and was eventually appointed bishop of the Church in Caesarea. And having, long ago, woken out of his sin, he died in peace, falling asleep, this time, in the Lord. Let us here, therefore, resolve and prepare to receive this time of grace with a determined purpose. Let's shake off that soporific comfort, the vice of spiritual sloth. The alarm bell of the Judgement is already sounding!