

REFLECTIONS FOR THE 31ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 30 November 2022

The Mount, The Residence at Littledale

“For you love all things that exist and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. . . You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living” (Ws 11:24, 26). These words from our first reading set the tone for today’s Liturgy of the Word. God who created the universe and all its creatures loves every one of us, even the most at risk, marginalized or flawed creature.



NASA's James Webb
Space Telescope
Pillars of Creation

Notice the words in the first creation story in the book of Genesis, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good” (Gen 1:3-4). Once God creates with a word, God sees that every created thing – light (1:4), earth and seas (1:10), vegetation (1:12), lights in the dome (sun, moon, and stars, 1:18), sea creatures and birds (1:21), land creatures (1:25) and humans – every created thing is good. God does not say, “Let there be light, and I declare that the light is good!” As Gregory E Hitzhusen says, “God creates, and then once that thing exists, its goodness becomes apparent to God. This makes it clear that God sees the value and goodness in all of creation.” When, on the sixth day, God sees all that has been created, the text says that God saw that it was “very good” (Gen 1: 31) or “exceedingly good.” Each created being is good; all creation together – the sacred communion of all creation – is exceedingly good!

Reflect on that thought for a moment. God creates you, and immediately looks at you and sees that you are good. Despite your flaws and imperfections, God sees you as good. In the same way, God sees every star, every stone, every waterfall, every ocean, every tree, every flower, every animal, every insect, every bird, every person as good. Our text from Wisdom goes even further, “For your immortal spirit is in all things” (Ws 11:12). God’s spirit is not simply in all humans but in all things.

This theme continues in Psalm 145, “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and the Lord’s compassion is over all that the Lord has made” (Ps 145:8-9) – over all that the Lord has made. In our pride as humans, for far too long, we have been assuming that this means us only and not all creation. Yet the biblical texts here reference “all things”, all that the Lord has made.”

During this coming week, we will celebrate the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. We have long held as precious “the Communion of Saints” – all of our loved ones gathered in heaven. We slowly began to realize that the Communion of Saints includes all of us living on Earth and connected by a thin veil with our loved ones who have died before us. Now



Angels Unaware, Timothy P. Schmalz

we are beginning to realize that it is truly a Communion of Holy Ones, human and other-than-human, all the beings which God has created and sees as good and loves. How rich our celebration will be this Tuesday in company with this sacred communion of all creation!

In the second letter to the Thessalonians, we humans are reminded by the writer, “We always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of the call and will fulfil by God’s power every good resolve and work of faith” (2 Thess 1:11). God not only creates us and sees us as good, but God continues the act of creating by making us worthy of our call to be good, to do good, to work faithfully. As we hear from the prophet Joel and from Peter’s first homily in the Acts of the Apostles, “God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young ones shall see visions, and your old ones shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Joel 2: 28-29, Acts 2:17-18). All we have to do is accept the Spirit poured out upon us. The letter goes on to give us some comforting words, “we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter” (2 Thess 2:2). Our response is to be one of trust, confidence in the One who creates and sustains us.

There is no surprise then that the Church chooses to place the story of Zacchaeus, found only in the Gospel of Luke, in the context of these readings. We will expect to see one whom God loves, one whom God sustains by the spirit poured out, one who responds with abundant joy to the call to be good. That one, in this story, is Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector, is trying to see who Jesus is, but, because he is short in stature, he climbs the sycamore tree to see him.



Sycamore tree, fruit, leaves

This story is so familiar to us. Yet how many of us see the sycamore tree as merely a prop in the story. We fail to see that it is a fundamental element of the story and of the message which it conveys. This tree family of sycamore, in the same family as the common fig tree, has existed on Earth for more than 100 million years. A native central and eastern European tree and one of the seven native species of Israel, it grows largely in hilly or mountainous regions. Its wood was highly valued by the people of Palestine because of its lightness and durability. It is attractive to aphids and, a variety of their predators, such as ladybirds, hoverflies, and birds. The flowers provide a good source of pollen and nectar for bees and other insects, and

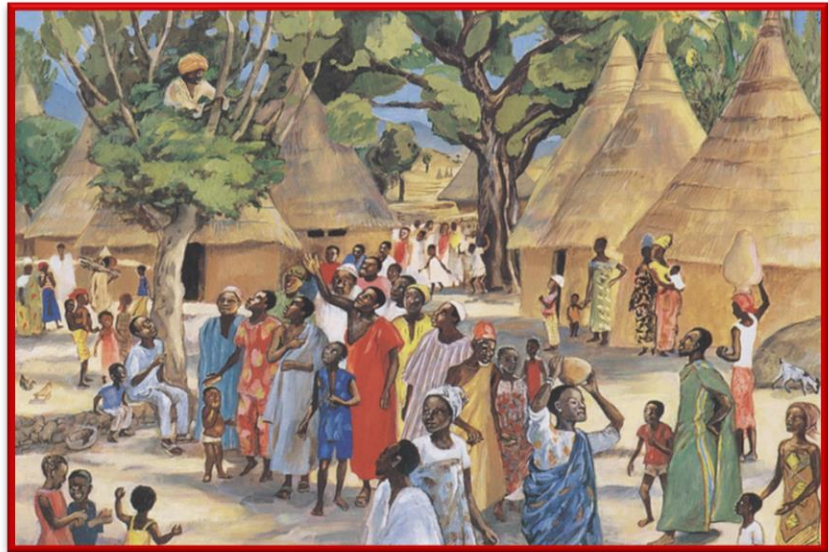
the seeds are eaten by birds and small mammals. Therefore, in Israel, the sycamore tree symbolises strength, protection, reliability, clarity, regeneration, and transformation.

In this story, the writer specifically identifies the sycamore to alert the reader that first clarity will come, then rebirth and transformation. The tree is an active participant in what happens between Jesus and Zacchaeus. Unlike the crowd, the sycamore supports Zacchaeus by giving him the safe place from which to see who Jesus is for him. In his seeing, Zacchaeus becomes transformed. Jesus “looks up to him” (not down on him as the crowds do) and announces that he is coming for a meal! Notice Zacchaeus’ response, “he hurried down and was happy to welcome him” (Lk 19:6). This man, reborn and transformed, promises Jesus that “half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times

as much” (Lk 19:8). Jesus trusts his response and confirms, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (Lk 19:9). Pope Francis says this of the story:

It is the encounter between Jesus Christ and the rich tax collector Zacchaeus, as a result of which Zacchaeus made a radical decision of sharing and justice, because his conscience had been awakened by the gaze of Jesus. This same spirit should be at the beginning and end of all political and economic activity. The gaze, often silent, of that part of the human family which is cast off, left behind, ought to awaken the conscience of political and economic agents and lead them to generous and courageous decisions with immediate results, like the decision of Zacchaeus. Does this spirit of solidarity and sharing guide all our thoughts and actions?

Jesus and Zaccheus
Jesus MAFA
Cameroon



The Jesuit retreat director, Philip Chircop, summarizes well the invitation for us in this story, “Journey with Zacchaeus today. Join him in the sycamore tree with eyes wide open and with the ears of your heart, sharpened and fine-tuned ... and listen. Hurry with him down the tree and walk with him, with a pilgrim heart, his path of conversion and radical transformation.” Where is the sycamore tree, the safe place, from which you gaze upon Jesus? How and where and when do you welcome Jesus into your presence?

Veronica Lawson rsm links the conclusion of the story back to the sycamore tree and our need to care for our common home – Earth and all Earth creatures: “Hospitality, joy, haste to respond to divine visitation. Jesus then acts to restore honour to Zacchaeus in the eyes of those who hold him and his kind in contempt. Zacchaeus is affirmed as a true descendant of his forbears in faith. Salvation for our house, our ‘common home’, will only come with comparable attention to what we have despoiled.”

Let us give the last word on this story to Steve Garnaas-Holmes who challenges us in this prayer-poem:

Would I climb a tree to see Jesus?
Would I make a fool of myself to meet God? Embarrass myself, risk humiliation?
(You’re not really in love till you’ve embarrassed yourself.)
What would I dare, or not dare? What would I risk to experience the Holy?

Am I ready for people to talk behind my back? To give away a lot of money?
To allow Jesus to invite himself in, to invade my life,
when I definitely have not cleaned lately?
To commit to a loony scheme that with Jesus could definitely get out of control?
Or do I slip back into the murmuring crowd, all happy to consume me?

God, give me the faith to be gutsy for Jesus.
To be crazy for you, and let others call me so.
To counter the crowd, all those looming opinions around me and inside me.
To follow a voice no one else believes in.
To be uncool for you.
God, give me the lovesick nerve to climb the fool tree.



Jesus and Zaccheus, Artist unknown