

Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity

November 3, 2013

Homily for the Anglican Use Mass

of

St. Thomas More Catholic Parish

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

Scranton, PA

Luke 19:1-10

The past eleven years of warfare in Afghanistan have taught us that occupying a foreign nation is a very expensive proposition. This was as true 2,000 years ago as it is today. The way we know that the United States is not like the imperialists of old has to do with how we pay for the occupation of foreign nations. We as tax-paying Americans are footing the bill for our troops to be in Afghanistan, but this is not what the British did 100 years ago in India, what the Spanish did 500 years ago in Cuba, or what the Romans did 2,000 years ago in Judea. Those empires all made the subjugated nation pay for their occupiers to be there. In other words, the victims of imperialism paid through various means for their own victimization.

This is why Zacchaeus was so hated, why the crowds murmured that Jesus had gone in to eat with a sinner, when he went to Zacchaeus' house. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus had grown rich by contracting with the Roman occupiers to collect the revenues in his district. He could collect as much as he wanted because he had the might of the Roman army to back him up, and the Roman soldiers were by and large not scrupulous about taking innocent lives. Indeed, we heard in our Gospel a few weeks ago about the people whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. We learn from this that even the Temple was not sacrosanct. The Romans killed innocent Jews while they were worshipping God. And this brutality was paid for with the money Zacchaeus had extracted from his fellow Jews.

Now imagine that your loved ones were among those killed by Pilate in the Temple, and at the same time you were struggling to stay afloat because of all the money Zacchaeus had taken from you. Wouldn't you think to yourself, "Jesus should be visiting me, not him!" Or maybe your hatred for Zacchaeus would lead you to hate anyone associated with him, including Jesus, who you could see was eating at Zacchaeus' house.

This morning I am going to baptize my nephew, and at the same time I will stand with my wife making promises on his behalf as godparents. We will be responsible in some measure for his formation as a Catholic, and this will be the case during a time in our nation's history that promises to be wrought with anxiety. Our orientation towards the Zacchaeuses of our own day and how we treat them will be an indicator of whether we do a good job forming Stephen Paul.

Many of our countrymen, through acts of omission and commission, are undermining the strength and future vitality of our republic. While millions refuse to invest in the future by bearing the children our nation needs, millions of others carelessly increase the debt our children will have to pay back a generation or two from now. Like Zacchaeus, these people are traitors, and their selfishness and greed amounts to treason. They aren't paying for a foreign army to occupy our cities and villages, but they do seem intent to make it very difficult to defend ourselves twenty, thirty, or forty years down the road. What am I supposed to tell Stephen Paul to think of such people? Are they worthy of his love and respect?

I think the answer can be found in the program Pope Francis has adopted since his election as Supreme Pontiff. Pope Francis has reached out to atheists and homosexuals, and he even washed the feet of a Muslim girl in a juvenile detention facility. This is not because he condones atheism, homosexuality, or juvenile crime. He has done this precisely because Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus and said to him, “Make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

The objection is made that Pope Francis should rather stand with the victims of the atheists, the homosexuals, and the criminals, in the same way that Jesus raised the only son of the widow of Nain and embraced little children while scolding his disciples. “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God.” The reality is that Pope Francis has done this. In May he excommunicated a priest who was an advocate of same-sex unions and women’s ordination. He then told an assembly of gynecologists and obstetricians never to perform abortions. To do so, he said, is to treat children as if they are disposable. And he recently reaffirmed the constant teaching of the Church that divorced and remarried Catholics who have not had their first union annulled may not receive Holy Communion.

What we see here, besides the obvious bias of the media, is a Pope who is reaching out to sinners the same way Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus. He could, of course, scold and shun the atheists, homosexuals and criminals, but this would be inconsistent with the method Jesus used to win Zacchaeus to the truth. Jesus’ love transformed the tax collector, and an oppressor and traitor became an instrument of grace, a man committed to justice and reparation.

What we are attempting to do here in the Providence section of Scranton is perfectly consistent with what Pope Francis is doing from the Throne of St. Peter. We should note, though, that we began our mission here before he was elected, before anyone even imagined Pope Benedict would resign. This is no credit to us, only an affirmation that the Church has always taught the necessity of showing sinners how much God loves them, even as we propose to them a better way. Pope Francis is not doing anything new. He is simply being treated by the media as if he were. The effect will be the same as it has always been. Sinners will be converted, and traitors will become patriots.

The key, of course, is that we love our traitorous neighbors incarnationally, not keeping sinners at arm’s length, but eating with them, staying with them, being with them. We can’t be worried that their wickedness is going to turn us bad. We must have the confidence of Jesus Christ, the assurance that His goodness will turn them good. Pope Francis believes this, and so do I. The challenge is that we impart this same faith to our children, to our godchildren, to our fellow Catholics. And we start by engaging Zacchaeus. He isn’t going to come to true faith and repentance any other way.