

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 26)

November 4, 2007

Isaiah 1:10-18

Psalm 32:1-7

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19:1-10

Lost and Found: the Seeker Becomes the One Sought

*There was a man in Jericho called Zacchaeus,
There was a man in Jericho called Zacchaeus;
But Zacchaeus, he was small,
And the people, they were tall,
But the Lord loved Zacchaeus better than them all.*

Accompanied by music with a calypso beat, our church choir would sing of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus whenever Luke 19:1-10 was assigned as the Gospel text. As we recounted the story in song, I would be reminded of three things about Zacchaeus; he was (1) small in stature, (2) despised by the townsfolk, and (3) loved by Jesus. Zacchaeus' diminutive height prompts him to climb a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus; yet it is Jesus who looks up and sees Zacchaeus and offers to visit with him in his home.

Set within the context of the "Travel Narrative" of Luke's Gospel (9:51 – 19:48), the story of Zacchaeus represents the last of Jesus' encounters with "outcasts" before entering Jerusalem. By visiting Zacchaeus' home, Jesus transgresses the code of ritual purity, since tax collectors were regarded as unclean by virtue of their job which involved entering homes and inspecting goods. Yet, Jesus chooses to honor Zacchaeus by accepting hospitality from him. Such an act on Jesus' part is very much in keeping with Luke's depiction of Jesus as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34, *CEV*), and it demonstrates Jesus' refusal to align himself with the standards and prejudices of the onlooking crowd.

As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have been contracted by Roman officials and assigned the responsibility of supervising the collection of taxes, tolls, tariffs, and customs fees in a given locale. Jews who collected taxes for the Romans were assumed to be dishonest, and thus despised. Tax collectors at that time were indeed known to make their profits by defrauding others and for their complicity in a corrupt system that exacerbated economic oppression.

Jericho was an important customs station for the major trade route between Judea and the lands east of the Jordan. It is very likely that Zacchaeus was a tax collector of some

standing inasmuch as he is described by Luke as “rich” (19:2). Hearing Zacchaeus so described may have prompted Luke’s audience to recall the preceding stories about a tax collector (18:9-14) who acknowledges his sin, and a rich man (18:18-30) whose attitude toward wealth blocks his access to the true “riches” and good news of God’s kingdom.

In contrast to the rich man who was unable to part with his riches, Zacchaeus offers to give half of his possessions to the poor—an amount in excess of the normal recompense for money illegally acquired (Leviticus 5:16, 6:1-5), and to repay fourfold anyone he may have defrauded (Exodus 22:1). Upon hearing this promise, Jesus declares that salvation has indeed come to Zacchaeus and his family. Further, Jesus declares that Zacchaeus is “a true son of Abraham” (19:9, *CEV*) and therefore a member of the household of God. When juxtaposed against Jesus’ earlier words in Luke’s Gospel about how hard it is “for rich people to get into God’s kingdom” (18:24, *CEV*), Zacchaeus’ actions demonstrate a turn-around on his part and that, when one first seeks for the kingdom of God, “other things will be yours as well” (Matthew 6:33, *CEV*).

In the closing verse, Luke summarizes Jesus’ divine vocation as looking for and saving “people who are lost” (19:10, *CEV*). As one who had been marginalized and despised, Zacchaeus is treated with dignity and welcomed by Jesus. In seeking Jesus, he becomes, instead, the one sought after and saved. He was lost but had been found.

Where do we see ourselves in this story? Are we part of the crowd who grumble when someone else is honored, particularly when we may feel that the one honored is undeserving of such recognition? In “seeing” Zacchaeus, Jesus saw into his heart. When Jesus looks into our hearts, may we invite him in, repent of our sinful ways, and respond with acts of love and gratitude.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves at the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

Today we remember to pray for the work of Bible Societies in: Congo (Democratic Republic of) – With thanks to God for the launch of the new Kanyok Bible and for the *Faith Comes By Hearing* program in Tshiluba, and with prayers for work on the Ngbandi translation, and Study Bibles in Lingala and modern Swahili, and for peace throughout the country; **Congo (Brazzaville)** – With thanks to God for the completion of the new Lari New Testament in collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church, and with prayers for the implementation of Funding Reform for a project with blind and visually impaired people; **Rwanda** – With thanks to God for the completion of the translation of the Kinyarwanda Children’s Bible and with prayers for funds to print it, and with prayers for the ability to translate and print a Study Bible for pastors, many of whom lack the resources they need to prepare sermons and Bible studies; **Burundi** – With thanks to God that peace is returning to the country, and with prayers that the churches will be come fully involved in the HIV/AIDS program and that there will be an end to all forms of violence in the country.

Activity Corner: “Justice” Actions and Prayers

Supplies needed: Bible, daily newspaper; paper; pen/pencil.

Read Luke 19:1-10. Compare Zacchaeus’ decision to share his wealth (19:8) with what John the Baptist taught (Luke 3:10-14). What constitutes justice for John? Make a list of the things John instructs his listeners to do. What on this list could you and members of your household do? Look through the day’s newspaper and pray for a situation that describes a lack of justice. Remember to pray for that situation throughout the week.