

THE EMMAUS SERIES

31st Sunday Year C

Wisdom 11:22 – 12:2

2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 2:2

Luke 19:1-10

Today salvation has come to this house

The story of the rich tax collector, converted when Jesus visited him, is found in Luke's gospel alone. He makes it part of the Saviour's instructions on his way to Jerusalem – together with stories about the teaching of Jesus on faith and prayer, other stories about his receiving of outcasts, and his advice concerning this world's possessions. In a sense, all these themes are brought together in this incident so well described in today's reading.

Zaccheus may have been small in stature, but he was a man of substance – a centre of attention, as he 'made his appearance'. As a senior tax collector, who presided over the collection of tolls and taxes in Jericho, an important centre because it was on the junction of two trade routes, Zaccheus would have been a man of considerable wealth. The attention he attracted would certainly not have been friendly. His undignified ascent into the branches of a tree to be able to see Jesus over the heads of the crowd would have provoked amusement. But the incident gives us an insight into the forthright character of Zaccheus – qualities that contributed, no doubt, to his worldly success. The attitude he displays in his encounter with Jesus also makes it clear that, for all his success, he is looking for more from life than the wealth he has accumulated. Drawn by what he has heard of the teacher from Nazareth, he disregards the amusement of the crowd and climbs the tree to see for himself. When Jesus calls him down in order to visit his house, his reactions are wholehearted and generous, 'he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully'.

Zaccheus is like so many people today who - though they are confused - are not far, in their generous outlook, from the kingdom of God. Those, on the other hand, who 'complain' that the Saviour has 'gone to stay at a sinner's house', are like the righteous who do not understand the generous mercy of God, and do not know how to reach out to those in need. With Jesus at his side, the forthright little tax official confounds his critics; he 'stands his ground', Luke tells us, and amazes the whole town by the generosity of the conversion to which he has been led by the words of Jesus. He is prepared to renounce his wealthy status, by giving half of his riches to the poor, and by repaying fourfold what he has gained unjustly by taking advantage of his position.

'Today', Jesus said, 'salvation has come to this house'. There are moments of grace in the lives of all of us, moments we shall never regret, if we respond trustingly and generously to the call of God. In his concern for the outcasts – stressed in the readings we have had from Luke's gospel in recent weeks - Jesus was giving expression to the true faith of old Israel, forgotten by so many of his contemporaries, and calling them back to that faith: clearly expressed in today's first reading from Wisdom. God loves all those God has brought into existence; if God 'corrects' and 'admonishes' it is that, as a 'lover, of life', the Lord may 'spare all'.

John Thornhill sm