

Sunday, November 3, 2019

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Wisdom 11:22–12:2

Responsorial: Psalm 145:1-2, 8-11, 13-14

2nd Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:11–2:2

Gospel: Luke 19:1-10

Following Jesus Through All of Life's Circumstances

Today salvation has come to this house. (Luke 19:9)

Today's Gospel paints a vivid picture of Zacchaeus the tax collector—wealthy, despised, and also very short—trying unsuccessfully to see through a crowd. He climbs a tree just to get a look at Jesus. It must have been an astonishing and amusing sight to see such a prominent person doing something so silly. You can just imagine the grin on Jesus' face as he looks up and sees Zacchaeus' irrepressible, childlike enthusiasm. Then that enthusiasm turns to joy when Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. Inspired by Jesus' warm words of acceptance, Zacchaeus promises to give half of his wealth to the poor and more than repay the people he has extorted.

So did Zacchaeus follow up on this bold promise? We'll never know since he is not mentioned again. After Jesus moved on, the hard work would have begun for Zacchaeus. If he gave away his money, he would have to learn how to live with less. He would have to fight the temptation to return to his dishonest methods of collecting taxes. He would have to earn the trust and friendship of his fellow townsfolk. Surely all of this was less fun than that initial life-altering encounter with Jesus. He may have had trouble maintaining his enthusiasm.

It's okay to not always feel excited about life as a follower of Jesus. Our faith journey can be like a long, successful marriage that starts out with the magic and passion of an early romance and develops into something calmer but deeper and more meaningful. There's no getting around the fact that our relationship with Jesus requires hard work sometimes. But it's good to know that he is always with us, ready to give us the grace we need.

Our attempts to follow Jesus don't have to be big, splashy gestures like Zacchaeus' initial response. Change will be gradual, and there will be setbacks, but with Jesus' help, our efforts will bear fruit.

“Jesus, help me to follow you with childlike trust.”

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. The first reading begins with these words: *Before the LORD the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth. But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people's sins that they may repent. For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. ... Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O LORD!*
 - How would you summarize the character and attributes of God as described in the first reading?
 - It is often said that the Old Testament image of God is so different from the New Testament image of God. In what way is the first reading's description of the attributes of God similar to the New Testament view of God?
2. The responsorial psalm opens with these words: *I will extol you, O my God and King, and I will bless your name forever and ever. Every day will I bless you, and I will praise your name forever and ever.* Like the first reading, it goes on to describe the attributes of God: *The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works. ... The LORD is faithful in all his words and holy in all his works. The LORD lifts up all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.*
 - The opening words of the psalm tell us to bless and praise the Lord *Every day* and *forever and ever*. Why is this important for us as Christians? Do you believe you will be doing this *forever and ever*? Why or why not?
 - How are the attributes of God described in the psalm similar to the first reading? How are they different?
 - How important is it for you to follow the Lord's example of graciousness, mercy, kindness, and compassion?
3. St. Paul begins the second reading with these words: *Brothers and sisters: We always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith, that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, in accord with the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.* It ends with these words: *We ask you, brothers and sisters, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling with him, not to be shaken out of your minds suddenly, or to be alarmed either by a "spirit," or by an oral statement, or by a letter allegedly from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand.*
 - St. Paul's beginning words are a powerful description of his intercessory prayers. How important is it to you to spend time every day interceding in prayer for the needs of others? Is there room for improvement?
 - The reading ends with Paul warning the early Christians to be on their guard against false prophets who seem to know when the Lord will return. How do his words apply to us, as well, today?
 - How would a deeper understanding of God's love and mercy help your view of the Lord's return be more hopeful?
4. In the Gospel reading, Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus, someone who was hated and disrespected by his contemporaries, with these words: *"Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house."* The people's response to Jesus' words were: *"He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner."* However, Zacchaeus' response was: *"Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over."* Jesus' final response is: *"Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."*
 - In what ways is the Gospel reading an example of the transforming power of Jesus' love and mercy?
 - The responses of Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the crowd were quite different. Why do you think this happened?
 - How can Jesus' words help you be less passive and more active in sharing the good news of Jesus with others?
5. The meditation is a reflection on the Gospel reading and considers what Zacchaeus' life might have been like: "After Jesus moved on." It ends with these words: "It's okay to not always feel excited about life as a follower of Jesus. ... Our attempts to follow Jesus don't have to be big, splashy gestures like Zacchaeus' initial response. Change will be gradual, and there will be setbacks, but with Jesus' help, our efforts will bear fruit."
 - Why is it important to consider that at times our on-going relationship with the Lord, like Zacchaeus, may be "less fun" than any "life-altering encounter with Jesus"?
 - How do the ending words of the meditation apply to you? How can you put them into practice?
 - Despite our shortcomings, and even our double standards, Jesus continues to reach out to us just as he reached out to Zacchaeus. What steps can you take to open yourself more to Jesus' transforming love and mercy?

Take some time now to pray and ask the Lord for the grace to follow him and trust in him under all circumstances. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as a starting point.

"Jesus, help me to follow you with childlike trust."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry.]