

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY – C
November 4, 2007

Many of us remember the OJ Simpson trial about 10 or 12 years ago when he was accused of killing his former wife and her friend. Even though he was found not guilty in the criminal trial, he was later found guilty by the civil court. But the uneven results left a lot of people thinking, Did he kill her, or not? Is he a murderer or just an innocent victim of the legal system?

This is similar to the question we're faced with when we read this Gospel story about Zacchaeus. Was he really a terrible sinner in need of conversion? Or was he the victim of his neighbor's prejudices and hatred?

When Jesus stated *publicly* that he wanted to stay overnight at the home of Zacchaeus, the neighbors of Zacchaeus were horrified. We can easily picture them gossiping among themselves about Jesus, whispering: "He's going to stay at the house of a sinner?" Actually, unless they had witnessed Zacchaeus committing some particular sin, how would they know he was a sinner? I mean, other than the obvious fact that we're *all* sinners.

It wasn't as much that Zacchaeus was a sinner, but that he was a dreaded *tax collector*! I've mentioned in the past couple of weeks that tax collectors were despised because of the dishonest methods they usually used to collect their taxes. In this case, we are very carefully told at the beginning of the reading that Zacchaeus was a *wealthy* tax collector, meaning that his honesty and integrity were being challenged because, if he didn't cheat the people, how did he become so wealthy?

So back to our original question: Was Zacchaeus an evil sinner, or just an innocent victim? Believe it or not, this question has often been debated by scripture scholars over the years. The problem comes from the translation from the original Greek and the verbs that are used.

If Zacchaeus' words are translated in the *present* tense, he is saying, "I give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I repay it four times over." But if these same words are translated in the future tense, which is not only possible but is the way it appears in our reading today, then he's saying, "I *will* give to the poor....and *will* repay it four times over."

Why is this important? Because if we use the first translation, the present tense, it implies that this is Zacchaeus' usual practice, the way he generally does business, and he is defending himself against the criticisms of his neighbors. If we use the second translation, the future tense, it implies that he intends to change his sinful ways and begin to act honorably toward others.

Clearly, the Church has chosen the future tense in the translation used for our Gospel reading today. One possible reason is that both the OT reading from the book of Wisdom and our Psalm, number 145, suggest that this was probably the case, and that Zacchaeus most likely was a sinner who needed conversion.

Does it matter? Probably not, but it's an interesting question because, either way, Zacchaeus is a very attractive character for discussion. He is so enthusiastic about seeing Jesus that he climbs a tree hoping to catch sight of him. Imagine this stodgy old tax collector scrambling up a tree. We are told he is "short of stature" although this, too, can be problematic because it's not clear from the Greek whether that phrase refers to Zacchaeus or to Jesus himself, since there has been some debate about Jesus' height.

At any rate, Zacchaeus is either a good person or is changing his ways and *becoming* a good man, so he is proud to welcome Jesus into his home. He is enthusiastic, generous and hospitable, a great combination of human virtues. But there was something here he didn't

know, unless he intuited it on some level. He wasn't consciously aware that along with the presence of Jesus comes the day of salvation, the age of the Messiah.

What would you do if you knew the world was going to end tomorrow? I remember back when the calendar changed from 1999 to 2000 and some people were speculating that it would be the end of the world. Well, we see how accurate they were. But someone asked me if I knew the world was going to end, what would I do? I told them I would immediately go back to smoking two packs a day.

But it's still a fun question to talk about, and the responses can tell a lot about the person's values and character, provided, of course, that the response is more sincere than the one I just gave.

St. Paul wrote his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, some of which we hear in today's second reading, to put an end to the people's belief that "the day of the Lord is at hand." Some of those early Christians, suspecting that the world was going to end any minute were not doing their fare share of work in their worshipping community. Their position was: if the world is going to end, why bother working?

St. Paul's advice to them—and to us—is pretty good, solid, sensible stuff. He says we should continue living a good Christian life every day, every week, every month, every year, no matter what. That means letting God work in our lives so that we can be worthy of the name Christian. It also means living a life of purpose and determination. It also means examining our consciences and trying hard to find ways to become better human beings, no matter how good we think we are now.

By living for the greater glory of God, we allow God to be glorified in us and to shine through us. Not only does this let us share in the actual glory of God himself, but it enables us to share that same glory of God with others. If Zacchaeus can do it—a short, wealthy, converted tax collector—then so can we.