

November 3, 2013 31st Sunday of Year C

November is the month when we put on the mind of the church in special remembrance of those who have died, marked with the sign of the cross of Jesus, and those others whose faith is known to God alone. On this first Sunday and oblate Sunday we honor that by our procession to the cemetery after Mass for a blessing of the graves. When we pray for the dead, it is to aid them to hasten to attainment of that promised beatific vision of the all holy trinity of God, of Jesus and Mary in their glorified humanity. Then they will join the company of all the saints and angels in their unending praise of God. Those praises were beautifully expressed in the sung responsory to the psalm: "I will praise your name forever, my king and my God." For us still here on our earthly pilgrimage we see those heavenly realities only in the darkness of faith.

In Jesus lifetime on earth many people wanted to see him for all kinds of reasons. Herod wanted to see him perform a miracle like walking on the water of the swimming pool. Some Greeks told Philip: We want to see Jesus. People wanted to touch him, or be touched by him, in order to be healed of illnesses. Some came to see him with ill will, looking for words or actions they could use to accuse him in order to silence him or get rid of him.

People will do extraordinary things to get a glimpse of celebrities. While attending an audience of Pope Pius XII many, many years ago I saw some in the crowd, especially women religious, likely Italian, climb the lamp posts in the Sala, the audience hall, in order to see the Pope as he was carried in on the gestatorial chair. Holding on with one hand they waved the other shouting: Viva il Papa, Viva il Papa.

In today's gospel we hear about the chief tax collector of Jericho, Zacchaeus, wanting to see Jesus so badly that he climbed a tree in order to do it. One wonders if his curiosity was just that typical of most of those in crowds who gather to see persons of importance? Zacchaeus must have heard stories about this man Jesus from Nazareth, who works miracles and teaches about the law with notable authority. He was not likely shouting 'Hosannas' with the crowd as Jesus walked into town with his entourage. I imagine he was a quiet onlooker, not wanting to attract too much attention to his undignified self up there in the tree. What a surprise when Jesus spotted him and asked him to come down and show him hospitality.

Some onlookers were judgmental about the whole incident. They questioned among themselves how Jesus could blatantly ignore the Jewish laws about not entering a sinner's house. In his joy Zacchaeus for his part promised an extraordinary gesture of generosity with his wealth. The text implies with that his encounter with Jesus caused a change of heart and practice, for it says Zacchaeus promised 'I shall give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.' It sounds as if he was not as generous as that until Jesus called him to come down, words that can be understood more than just literally.

Jesus' free association with tax-collectors, the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, the woman caught in adultery, the lepers and others on the fringes of society or religion, are exemplary of that mercy, compassion, and patience of God that was at work in him. We heard that benevolent mind of God toward his creation beautifully described in the first reading from the Book of Wisdom. The author wrote that God created everything from nothing, pronounced it good and that God holds it in existence because he loves it.

This benign aspect of Israel's God can be found in some passage in probably every book of the Old Testament. Time and time again God threatens punishment for rebellions and idolatries, but then relents, sometimes after an advocate of the people, like Moses, pleads with him. He made a covenant with this particular people, and he cannot be unfaithful even though they are unfaithful. I am God, not man. I see, think, and act differently from the way you do.

On the other hand the O. T. has many passages depicting God as a stern father, the lawgiver who commands our obedience and threatens severe sanctions for disobedience, and often carries them out. Examples abound: the fiery serpents for grumbling during the desert trek, the three punishment options given to David for the census, King Saul deposed for his disobedience, the military defeats and the exiles, and so many others, either concerning individuals or the whole people of Israel.

For a healthy personal relationship with the Lord we have to hold these two aspects of God in a balance of their tensions. If we focus too much just on the characteristic of God as merciful and forgiving, it can lead to presumption of God's mercy. Then we easily give up trying to overcome repeated moral failures, bad habits like telling lies, taking others property, excesses in appetites, laziness, gossiping, lusting, acting haughtily, and undue preoccupation with health, appearance and possessions. We just go to confession asking forgiveness for the same things thinking we will never overcome them. Don't you believe in the freeing and transforming power of Jesus love for you personally?

If we focus primarily on a God who is demanding of obedience, who we always suspect is looking for faults so that he can punish us, we will live in fear of his wrath, perform our religious obligations in servile fear. Only true love can cast out that kind of fear. We are taught to say in the Act of Contrition: I am heartily sorry for my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and pains of hell, BUT MOST OF ALL because I have offended you my God who are all good and deserving of all my love. Love, not fear, is the proper motive for obeying God's commandments. They too are God's gift to guide us in right conduct and ways of peaceful living together in a world full of many voices, false teachers, and ambiguities.

In the opening prayer we asked God to grant us the grace of hastening without stumbling to attain to the promises he has made. **Hastening** implies making an effort, not just lazing along. **Without stumbling** implies we can see and will avoid the obstacles that will prevent us from attaining the goal. What is the goal but life on high with Jesus? So let us return to the altar gladly and with thanksgiving, to offer the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. He is the host who invites us to dine with him on the sacrament of the eucharist, his body and blood. When he offers himself in obedient love for the Father, we are inspired to strive to do the same by our surrender to God's will in all that comes to us in this life. We have good reason to begin to practice that praise of God that we hope one day will we will never cease to do in the company of the angels and saints. To the merciful Father, Son and Holy Spirit be honor, glory, praise and obedience now and forever. AMEN

