

Reflection on the Gospel-Ordinary Time 31C
(Luke 19:1-10)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Last week's gospel story featured an unnamed toll collector, someone who found devious ways to make a living, yet faced his shortcomings and came before God in openness and humility. This week's gospel features Zaccheus of Jericho who, like the toll collector of the parable, is willing to admit his failings and is unafraid to demonstrate his faith in a very public way. Zaccheus is a chief tax collector, possibly responsible for overseeing the activities of other tax collectors. Whether or not this is the case, he is a wealthy man. Zaccheus is short of stature, we are told, but fairly enterprising in facing the dilemma that this poses. His stature is not an impediment to tree-climbing in a good cause: he wants to see what Jesus is like and he lets nothing get in the way. He runs ahead and climbs the tree. Jesus looks up and tells him to come down quickly, "for I must stay at your house today." The house of a public "sinner" is Jesus' personal choice of accommodation.

There are echoes in this story of Mary's haste to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth, and of the joy these women share in Mary's pregnancy. Jesus invites himself to the home of Zaccheus who provides hospitality "joyfully". Hospitality, joy, haste to respond to divine visitation: these are constant themes in Luke.

In any human group there are the critics. This time everyone who sees what is happening has something to say. They complain that Jesus chooses to stay with a sinner. The critics no doubt consider themselves more worthy hosts for God's prophet than Zaccheus. They have little love in their hearts. Their criticism of Zaccheus echoes that of Simon the Pharisee when Jesus allows himself to be touched by a "sinner" woman (Luke 7:36). Like Zaccheus, the woman's sins have already been forgiven. That is why she knows how to love, according to Jesus. There are clues in the narrative that Zaccheus, though labelled as a sinner, has changed his ways. The future tense of our translation ("I will pay") obscures this important element in the story. He gives half his property to the destitute and if he has cheated anyone, he pays them back four times the amount. In other words, he already goes way beyond what is required of a faithful Jew.

Jesus looks at Zaccheus and assures him that salvation has come to his house. He then turns to the crowd and acts to restore honour to Zaccheus in the eyes of those who hold him and his kind in contempt. Like the bent-over woman and Lazarus the beggar at the rich man's gate, Zaccheus is a true descendant of Abraham, his ancestor in faith.