

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Wisdom 11:22-12:2 / Luke 19:1-10)
03.11.2019
To see

The story of Zacchaeus would provide a good source of inspiration for an ad for an opticians. Everything begins with Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus and with Jesus looking at Zacchaeus. We have two men who look at and discern in one another more, far more, than what is given to see at a first sight.

When Zacchaeus sees Jesus, he does not feel threatened and Jesus does not reject the small and inquisitive man. The two men are open, willing to be surprised and to go beyond what is expected from and supposed about them.

What would have been normal and awaited by all around was that Jesus ignore Zacchaeus, and that Zacchaeus despise Jesus. These 2 men crossed many social or psychological barriers, and the eye contact between them opened the door to a miracle: Zacchaeus' conversion.

Once Jesus is in Zacchaeus' home, vision still plays its part. At last Zacchaeus sees himself in Jesus' light, and so he no longer needs to cling to his false self. He can let go of everything which holds him captive and be truly who he is called to be.

The danger for Zacchaeus might have been to remain a prisoner of the way others looked at him. We are told that those present "complained when they saw what was happening". We have here an interesting parallel with the episode of the meeting between Jesus and the rich young man (cf. Mk 10:17-22). Jesus "looking at him, loved him" (v. 21), yet the young man "went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (v. 22). In sharp contrast with the young man, Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus' loving gaze and gives away his money.

The last step of Zacchaeus' conversion is that he becomes able to relate to those around him in a new way. Others are no longer there to be used, abused or despised.

Zacchaeus realises that the poor and those whom he cheated have to be looked at with respect, with the same respect that he saw Jesus held in his eyes when he looked at him.

It may be helpful to note here that the word *respect* has the same Latin root as *spectacles* and means *to look at*. The lesson we can draw from the meeting between Jesus and Zacchaeus is how much Jesus respects all men and women. How liberating it is to be respected, to respect oneself and to respect others. Zacchaeus' conversion is a journey from alienation from God, oneself and others, to life-giving relationships; it is a journey from self-loathing and loathing of others to self-respect and respect of others. It is as if new glasses were given to Zacchaeus and that suddenly he is able to look at all people in the same way God looks at them.

Our 21st century is all about images. According to a 2015 report, the average smartphone user has 630 photos stored on his or her device. Over the years, Facebook and Twitter have become more and more image-driven. And Snapchat is one of the fastest-growing social networks.

What is the impact of this cultural trend on the way we use our eyes? Have we become more attentive, more perceptive or, on the contrary, are we training our eyes to skim over the surface of things and people and to remain at the level of appearances?

Charlotte Brontë reminds us that “appearance should not be mistaken for truth.” We must be careful to keep our eyes longing for truth, searching for what really matters, what is essential. We cannot be satisfied with appearances, with a vision blurred by laziness and prejudice. We need to make the effort to go deeper, to really look, to truly see and to genuinely discern.

One visible outcome of the fact that Jesus looked at Zacchaeus in truth is that “Zacchaeus welcomed him joyfully”. The word translated here by *joyfully* is the same that is used for the magi when they see the child Jesus (Mt 2:10).

There is great joy in, at last, being one’s self in truth and being looked at with respect and accepted as such.

Zacchaeus’ experience is supposed to be ours: looking at Jesus, in his light we can see ourselves in truth and know that we are loved; then reflecting to others the light we look at we can see them in truth and in love.

The glasses of bigotry and self-righteousness, of our fears and arrogance distort the reality and encourage us to create a false self ensconced in a false security.

Now is the time for us to ask ourselves the tough questions: How do we look at God, at others and at ourselves?

What kind of lenses do we use, what kind of information do they send to our brain and heart when we see a homeless person, a lesbian couple, a migrant, a veiled Muslim woman, a neighbour or a member of our family with whom we have a difficult relationship? Or what do we think of ourselves when we have made a mistake, when we are not up to the standard we have imposed on ourselves? What do I see when I look at myself?

It must be clear that we are not supposed to like or agree with everybody or with everything. In all our relationships, in order for them to be real and healthy, there must be room for disagreements, disappointments and challenges.

However we must not imprison anybody, ourselves included, in appearances and superficial feelings and opinions born out of fear and complacency.

When we look at others, does it unlock their heart and free them? Does it awaken hope and confidence in them? Does it help them to move on in life? We have to remember that others are also sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Christ... and our brothers and sisters in Christ.