

Excerpts from “The One Thing Needful,”

Sermons of Archbishop Andrei (Rymarenko, 1893-1978)

Sundays before Lent: Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a tax-collector and a very rich man. He was successful in life. At that time among the Jewish people, he had become what we would call a V.I.P. He possessed much and was a powerful man. All his worldly calculations turned out to be correct. But one thing he miscalculated: time is unyielding. Life and years go by and old age sets in. And he saw that everything he had gathered was for nothing. He couldn't make use of his riches — he lacked both strength and health.

And at the same time the life he was living, the life of a tax-collector, left in his heart a kind of anguish: he had offended a widow, he had treated an orphan unfairly, he had grieved a weak person — he was a “taker”! He was possessive, powerful and strong. Here the Lord had endowed him with many years, and he didn't need this wealth. And conscience? A bad conscience tormented him, and there was no way he could free himself from this conscience.

Then he heard that a prophet was passing by. At that time he didn't yet understand that Christ was the Son of God, but he knew that this was a rabbi, a teacher. So he decided to try this, as a last resort. And he went to meet Him. But here he saw that there was such a crowd that it would be impossible for him to meet Christ. But there happened to be a fig tree along the roadside, and he climbed up into this tree. There he was in the tree. Now don't miss this moment.

What would happen here in America if some important official, a congressman, a governor, the mayor of a city, or some millionaire, in his wish to look at a new preacher, before the eyes of the public, on one of the main streets, climbed the first available tree? What would you think of him? How this could harm his social position, the coming election! And yet the very same thing was happening in Jewish society. What mockery, what malice surrounded him! And he? He wasn't afraid of humiliation, he didn't need anything. He was suffering. He had to have help. And here he saw that, indeed, Christ was that prophet who could somehow help him. What was this crowd to him, this mockery?

And suddenly, Christ was unexpectedly before him. “Come down; for today I must abide at thy house” (Lk. 19:5). And here this miracle took place. Christ stayed at Zacchaeus' house. But maybe many people will ask, was this really a miracle? In the Gospel there are much greater miracles, real miracles. But here it was just a visit; there was nothing supernatural. Here was something more than supernatural. Look at what happened. The full strength of conscience was revealed to Zacchaeus. He as if gave over his conscience to Christ and Christ sanctified his heart. And out of joy that his heart was freed from this stone of sin, from everything that he had done, Zacchaeus said: “Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (Lk. 19:8).

The Sunday before last told us: “Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” And this Sunday shows us repentance in action: Zacchaeus, the fig tree, the sensation of a sick conscience. And we must bring ourselves to such a state that our heart will be penetrated by this fear of God, with weeping. Also we are shown what this “Kingdom of Heaven” is: this is Zacchaeus⁴ after repentance, when his heart was made so expansive that he was ready to embrace everyone, was ready to give everything away, to make everyone rich. Here is the spirit of Eternal Life which must visit us.

May the Lord help us, brothers and sisters, to begin the work of fasting. We are still in the forefeast of Lent, but the foment is approaching for us to cross the threshold into this time.