

Sermon: The Sunday of Zacchaeus

by Saint Philaret, Metropolitan of NY

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In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today during the Divine Liturgy we heard St. Luke relating the story of how the Lord visited the home of the Chief Publican Zacchaeus, and how salvation came to his whole house.

By the way, all those who know the order of the church service readings remember that with this Gospel there breaks a sort of dawn of the yet far far away, but still nearby great holy day of Christ's Resurrection. From this point on, starting with this coming Sunday, there will be three preparative weeks which make us ready to enter Great Lent; the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, the Sunday of the Last Judgment; then "Forgiveness Sunday" and Great Lent, which is ended by Holy Week (we call it Passion Week) followed by the Holy Pascha. This especially wonderful and grace-filled period of our Church year is nearing.

But let us return to today's Gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ was passing the city of Jericho, which is located in a very picturesque landscape, making a sharp contrast to the rocky nature of the surrounding mountains.

The Evangelist tells that in the city of Jericho, which the Lord was passing, lived the publican Zacchaeus, who was not only a publican but also the chief among the publicans. From history we know well that the people hated the publicans, who not only collected the taxes for the much-hated Roman authorities, but also collected an excess, which the Romans disregarded because it was convenient to them to accept the service of publicans.

When Zacchaeus found out that the Lord would pass through his city, he badly wanted to see Him. The glorious news about the Divine Wonderworker had thundered over the whole of Palestine. Perhaps he knew that this is the same Wonderworker who called the publican Matthew, who, when called did not consider to whom he would give his job, but simply got up, left everything behind and followed the Saviour. But right away there came a hindrance of a practical nature: Zacchaeus was short. Because of this he had to resort to a strategy which doubtless gave rise to much ironical laughing.

Zacchaeus ran ahead of the procession and, as if he were a boy, climbed a sycamore tree which was growing by the road. When a man is overwhelmed by spiritual inspiration, he disregards all derision and obstacles. The wish of Zacchaeus is fulfilled. He does see Christ. But our Lord has a habit of giving more than a man asks for -of giving as much as he can accept. And here, lifting up His Divine Eyes He tells Zacchaeus:"Make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house". Of course Zacchaeus rushed to descend, and as it is said by a folk expression, "He rolled down like a musical top" and joyfully he received in his home this precious Guest.

Quite often we hear in the church yard gossiping, evil talking and judging of people. It happened also at that time. The enemies of Christ hissed in their fury when they saw Him entering Zacchaeus' house. Everybody heard them- The Lord Himself and Zacchaeus too. But Zacchaeus reacts in a very unusual way. He steps forward and solemnly declares: "Behold, 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.”

St. John Chrysostom in his interpretation of this Gospel says that Zacchaeus had not heard the Gospel's teaching as yet, but already he acts as a disciple of the Gospel. All those who judged him, certainly, as it is said, bit their tongues. All became quiet, and in this silence Zacchaeus's act received its appraisal in the merciful words of The Saviour: “This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham.”

With this story the Church offers us a wonderful example of living and acting repentance at the beginning of these preparatory weeks before lent. But one must remember that if we seek salvation, we also have to behave like Zacchaeus, who did not reason, did not put off, did not think long, but immediately repented and corrected his life. Lent comes - the time for repentance - and this is why the Church especially exhorts us to follow Zacchaeus' example so that we will achieve pardon as he did.

Amen.