

HOMILY for 31st SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year C

A man named Jack was walking along a steep cliff one day when he accidentally got too close to the edge & fell. On the way down, he grabbed a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down & to his horror saw that the drop below him was more than a thousand feet, & he couldn't hang on to the branch forever.

So, Jack began yelling for help, hoping that someone passing by would hear & lower a rope or do something to help him.

"Help! Help! Is anyone up there? Help!" Jack yelled. No one heard him. He was about to give up when he heard a voice, "Jack, Jack. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!"

"I can see you, Jack. Are you alright?"

"No! Yes! But, who are you, & where are you?"

"I am the Lord, Jack. I'm everywhere?"

"The Lord? You mean GOD?"

"That's me."

"Oh, God, please help me! I promise that if you get me down from here, I'll really be a good person. I'll go back to church & serve you for the rest of my life."

"Easy on the promises, Jack. Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully."

"I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me."

"Ok. Let go of the branch."

"What?"

"I said, let go of the branch. Trust me. Let go."

There was a long silence... Finally Jack yelled, "Help! Help! Help! Is there anyone else up there?"

Anyway, in the last couple of Sundays, we have heard about the topic of prayer. Today's cute story shares with us another occasion that we might come to God in prayer. We usually call out to God for help when we're in trouble like Jack in the cute story. But, there are other occasions that we might ask God in prayer to assist us. In fact, this Sunday's Gospel tells us about the story of Zacchaeus & how he searched for Jesus to help him find a new life. Here's how today's Gospel shares with us that story: "Jesus, upon entering Jericho, passed through the city. There was a man named Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector & a wealthy man. He was trying to see what Jesus was like, but being small of stature, was unable to do so because of the crowd. He first ran on in front, then climbed the sycamore tree which was along Jesus' route, in order to see Him. When Jesus came to the spot, He looked up & said: 'Zacchaeus, hurry down. I mean to stay at your house today.' He quickly descended, & welcomed Jesus with delight... Zacchaeus said to the Lord: 'I give half of my belongings, Lord, to the poor. If I have defrauded anyone in the least, I pay him back in fourfold.'"

As we can see, Zacchaeus searched for Jesus to help him find a new life. Evidently Zacchaeus had a bad, sinful past as a tax collector. The reasons that everyone back then despised a tax collector were, first of all, he collaborated with the enemy to take resources from his homeland to support an evil empire. Also, a tax collector is usually greedy like most people & would not hesitate to cheat & keep some of the collected taxes for himself. Furthermore, a tax collector would use his powerful position to bully & extort his neighbors for

his own benefits. That sinful way of life pushed Zacchaeus away from the Lord & his community. He probably heard about Jesus & His divine power from people around him. He was told about Jesus' Good News & amazing miracles. He wanted to look for Jesus & meet this wonderful prophet himself. He finally saw Jesus with his own eyes & could not wait to turn his life over to the new prophet. He believed that Jesus had the authority to forgive his sinful past & the compassion to give him a second chance. That's exactly what happened to Zacchaeus. He was forgiven & granted a new life under the guidance of our Lord Jesus. He promised to repay his wrong actions & help out the poor & the lowly. His prayer to find a new life in Jesus was finally answered.

One of the important discoveries that the story of Zacchaeus tells us is that if we are committed to search for the Lord & His divine help like he did, our prayer would be rewarded handsomely in the end. We will meet the Lord who would be eager to help us find what we need. That is the result of a sincere, persistent prayer. Another wonderful discovery that the story of Zacchaeus can teach us is that our Lord Jesus is compassionate, kind, & forgiving. Like the Pharisees & scribes, many people back then would not forgive & welcome home a sinner like Zacchaeus. That is why everyone began to murmur, "He [Jesus] has gone to a sinner's house as a guest" when they heard that Jesus would want to come to Zacchaeus' home & visit him. That's the God who continues to welcome us home & listen to our prayer every day. In case we still doubt of God's love & mercy for us, today's First Reading has this message to tell us: "...But, you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; & you overlook the sins of the people that they may repent. For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made... But, you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord & lover of souls." As you just heard, our God is merciful, loving, & forgiving. That is someone whom we come to ask for help in prayer every day.

The story of Zacchaeus in today's Gospel reminds me of a similar story in the Bible, namely, the story of the Prodigal Son. Like the Prodigal Son, Zacchaeus wasted some of his life on doing all sorts of bad things. He thought that he was living out his dream & having a time of his life. He did not realize that his bad lifestyle pushed away not only everyone around him but also his God. Thankfully, he had a merciful, loving, & forgiving God. Today's Gospel tells us how he met his God in person; & he surely was surprised to see his God welcome him back with open arms. That is the God whom we come to pray for help & guidance in good times & in bad. We might have the craziest prayer to bring to God every day. Or, we might have a bad lifestyle like Zacchaeus or the Prodigal Son did. But, today's Gospel & First Reading let us know that we have a compassionate, kind, & forgiving God. So, we can bring any prayer to God, including the one of personal conversion, & be assured that God would hear it & come to our aid.

My dear brothers & sisters, it's not pleasing when our prayer does not get answered the way we want. Fortunately, we have a merciful, loving, & forgiving God, who is willing to reach out to us & welcome us home in times of need. So, be assured that our God will answer our prayers in due time. Now, let me leave with you these words of encouragement in today's Second Reading & ask you to keep on praying: "We pray for you always that our God may make you worthy of His call, & fulfill by His power every honest intention & work of faith."