



My dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

This Sunday's Gospel tells of our Lord's encounter with Zacchaeus, a tax collector living in Jericho. During Christ's ministry, tax collectors were not simply disliked because they extorted the people to pay themselves, but they were also considered traitors, because those taxes they collected, of course, went to the occupying Romans.

Zacchaeus, like most of the citizens of Jericho, wished to see Jesus as He entered the city. However, St. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus "*...could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature*" (Luke 19:2). A clever man, Zacchaeus decided to climb into a sycamore tree, to give himself a better view. Jesus stopped, looked up, and said, "*Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today*" (Luke 19:6). Zacchaeus was very happy to hear that Jesus wished to visit him, but the crowd was scandalized, saying to one another, "*He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner*" (Luke 19:7).

Though Zacchaeus knew what his neighbors thought, he was so moved by Christ's love, he sought to change his ways, promising Jesus, "*Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold*" (Luke 19:8). Zacchaeus understood that his practice was wrong and decided to begin the process of true and sincere repentance, by showing Christ a real commitment to correcting his sins (What else can be said of repaying someone four times the amount you have stolen from them?).

There is, of course, a specific reason this reading is selected for this week: because Zacchaeus Sunday precedes the three-week pre-Lenten period which will mark the start of *Triodion*. As we prepare ourselves for the 40-Day Lenten Fast, we are meant to recall that like Zacchaeus, Christ calls all of us to come down and meet Him in a spirit of humility and repentance, where He asks us to allow Him to be a guest in the home which is our heart.

The people of Jericho may have been scandalized, but Christ was not like the Pharisees and rulers, who separated themselves from sinners. Christ came into this world to rejoin God and Man, even extortionists like Zacchaeus. Therefore, our Lord says this to Zacchaeus and the crowd to demonstrate the purpose of His salvific mission, now, and for all time: "*Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:9-10).

+SEVASTIANOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta