

The Back of the Bulletin

Man In A Tree

Jesus and a large crowd, making their way along a road...and a little fat man sees them approaching. He wants to be part of the experience, and he's determined to see and to listen. Sadly, every member of the crowd has a grudge against him, because he's a quisling tax-gatherer who lives off the extortion the Romans allow him to commit in his division. So he wants to be a sharer, but not to be seen himself. He wants to spy.

The Eye Of The Lord

You don't have to imagine that Jesus has a secret spiritual source of information about Zacchaeus. He's got eyes, and the sight of a cur-9lfs little figure scrambling up into a tree enough to attract his attention. His companions on the road will be delighted to fill him in with complaints and information about the man, I've always believed that he would pretend not to know Zacchaeus is there, until the very moment when he arrives under the tree. Then his eyes suddenly pierce the foliage, and a frightened little man finds himself gazing into the eyes of the Son of God, who *calls him by his name*. The cover is blown, and I see him practically tumbling out of the tree with fright and shock.

No Self-Respect?

If you've been well brought-up with a firm idea of your own value and self-respect, you'll never know how Zacchaeus feels. His life had gone bad early on, perhaps: he was never much of a specimen, and couldn't find a decent wage because he was unemployable. He saw a way out of his problems when the Romans were looking for someone who would take their tainted job. It was a cynical search, and the power of the Romans was sufficient for them to protect him from the active hatred he will have inspired. But his fate was sealed when he took his post: he would never again have the trust or intimacy he wanted from his

countrymen. He is a pariah, and no-one will come near him.

Today Salvation Has Come!

Jesus breaks the shell of this isolation. Not only will he speak to him: he will go to stay in his house, he will share his table, and the whole crowd will have to like it or lump it. This is the most beautiful thing any great leader can do: to break the isolation of an outsider, by simply standing beside him. He displays complete superiority to the people who have cut Zacchaeus off; he risks all his own credit to do so. But there is something more here than a human sympathy with attitude. What inspires Jesus to do this reaching out to sinners is the divine quality described in the first reading today: the assurance given us in the Book of Wisdom that *whatever God has made, he loves!* This is the dynamite that blows down all the walls of hatred and misunderstanding that divide humanity. If it is there in the world, it is there because God loves it; and we shall never be like God until our own sympathies are enlarged to include it too.

Stretching The Walls Of The Heart

Our natural limitations are so easy to live with. We forget so easily that our destiny is to resemble God. Many people, with no faith, go through their lives never questioning their instincts or their justice. When Jesus hears this sad story, he is resolved to treat Zacchaeus with a dose of divine love. The response is so generous and so instantaneous, because the love of Christ has behind it the might of God's justice and mercy, his love for all that he has made. While we take on the task of loving more generously, we might also try to accept more generously the same love which brought the taxman down from his tree, generous and reborn.

Fr Philip