

Zacchaeus is a short man, and has been all his life. Like many people who have fallen short in their relationships, he has made a friend of his isolation to take on a way of life that exploits those who have shunned him. This has only turned those who were indifferent to him into his enemies, and he has become a lonely spectator of the human game, rather than a player. Here he is, hiding in his tree, so as to get a good view of what happens, without the angst of being caught up in it.

When you think of our civilisation, it has always had that tendency. I read a book once that described the Colosseum in Rome as the place where the fall of the Roman Empire was made certain. The population of Rome didn't have to work. They were fed from the public purse on the tribute of the Empire. Growing idle and dissipated, they became that dreaded monster, the Roman mob. Kept fed and happy - the phrase was *bread and circuses* - they behaved reasonably well. But they could be bribed and bought and sold, and so they had the spirit of slaves. The Colosseum made up a picture of the Roman state; everyone had his rank and place, and the whole of Roman society was represented there. The best seats - just above the level where you could be splashed with the blood of the contests, but low enough to get a real taste of the action - was reserved for the empurpled Senatorial class, with the Emperor's royal box prominent in the centre. But these massive gatherings of the Roman people was assembled to watch the crude slaughter of animals, and eventually gladiators and criminals; the only place where the whole community felt itself to be together was polluted with the utmost cruelty that could be devised. From their appointed place, the Romans looked on these horrors, and their humanity was drowned in blood.

We confine ourselves today to the watching of football matches, which some sections would like to transform into brawls; the greatest assemblies of life audiences seem to be for motor racing, where many gather at the points in the track most likely to yield collisions and crashes. And we have perfected this community of watching by the television, whereby you can, if you like, turn your whole life into the watching of others, while you yourself pretend not to be involved. What we allow to be on the television is as revealing about us, as those scenes of slaughter the Romans allowed into their theatres.

Jesus invades this sick *scopophilia* in a wonderful way. I'm sure he saw Zacchaeus shinning up his tree from a distance, I'm sure he asked about him, and I'm sure he got a full portrait of the nasty little runt from the people he had exploited. I'm sure he played his part and casually approached the tree, and at the very last moment, he stopped, and swung his eyes upward, piercing the foliage: and this lonely, lifeless, self-hating outcast finds himself locking gaze with the incarnate Son of God. It's one of the great moments of Luke's Gospel, full as it is of outcasts of every kind. *Zacchaeus! Come down! I am staying at your house today.* I'm sure Zacchaeus fell out of the tree; but more importantly he falls out of his isolation and his life of despairing, punishing hatred.

Today, salvation comes to this house, and this son of Abraham. What is vital for us is to note that this inrushing love does not proceed from any trivial idea of tidying up an errant character. This is the lived-out experience of what the first reading said: God never hates anything he has made, but gives us time to repent. He never withdraws his gifts, or changes his mind about us. Jesus isn't a scoutmaster, to help people to play nicely and be friends. He is the Shepherd of the Universe, and his power to strike and unite is the power of God. When our lives seem stricken and helplessly lost, the power of Christ is waiting to cancel our distance, and bring us close to the power that made us. *I am staying at your house today.*