



## Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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### *The Tree that Bore Fruit: Zacchaeus Sunday* Week of February 2, 2014

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost!*

How St. Luke loves this phrase! It was a summary of the entire Gospel that he promulgated to the Gentiles, those who were separate from the holy people of God in Israel. For the third evangelist, it was clear that above all things, the mission of the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ was to heal, to save, to call all people into that relationship with the Father which is salvation. *"The son of Man came to seek and to save the lost!"*

And there was no one more lost than Zacchaeus. St. Luke masterfully summarizes the hopelessness of his life with only a few words. He says that Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector and rich". A triple whammy. Not just a tax collector (i.e., one who took food from the mouths of widows and children to send money to the pagan government that oppressed the holy people of God), but also a *chief* tax collector – how awful is that! And then, to add insult to injury, St. Luke observes: *"... and he was rich."* Wealth is an impediment to the radical trust in God that the Scriptures refer to as *faith*, the quality exemplified by the Abraham, reckoned unto to him as righteousness itself. Zacchaeus was a chief tax

collector and rich; an odious little man, who had stolen to support those who oppressed his own people; a man who had trusted not at all in God, but in the filthy lucre of wealth.

But the Grace of the All-Holy Spirit had wondrously entered his heart and brought him to repentance; glory to God! Somehow, he came to himself, as did the Prodigal Son about whom we will hear in only two short weeks as we continue to progress into the period of the Triodion. Zacchaeus went out of himself to see Jesus, and climbed the sycamore-fig tree to gaze upon the One to Whom the Spirit drew him; and in climbing that tree, he becomes forever the sign of the tree that bears fruit, in contrast to the tree that is barren. Zacchaeus came to Jesus in repentance. And when he is called down by the Master, he bows before Him and states: *“Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and, if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”* **THIS**, brothers and sisters in Christ, is repentance; **THIS** is the grace to which all of us are called.

We hear this story on the Sunday before the beginning of Triodion, for the Holy Fathers would have us renew our focus on the Grace of Repentance and on the lesson that Zacchaeus teaches us by his example. The Holy Spirit leads us to repentance and brings us into union with the Savior Jesus Christ. To be one with Him is indeed the goal of our lives. But let us not miss what is perhaps the most important of all points: Zacchaeus was indeed a scoundrel, perhaps a monster – one whom the righteous elders of that time would have gladly seen thrown out of the city into the dark places of isolation. But the Lord came to the repentant sinner, not at all impeded by his sin. He came and invited himself into the house of the sinner and was not discouraged at all by the just opinion of the people and the elders and the scribes whose tongues wagged in gossip and protest. He came to the house of Zacchaeus, because as St. Luke emphasizes in the end of the story, *“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

This, Brothers and Sisters, is what we are to be about; it is our mission in a nutshell. We are to seek and to save the lost. We are not to look only to ourselves, for there is no salvation apart from our self-giving to others. And we must not be impeded by the misery of the sin around us; like our Lord, we must look around and up, noticing people like Zacchaeus and calling them into communion with the Father. The greater the sin, the greater the need; the more despicable the action, the more desperate the need for healing. Every person bound by sin waits, knowingly or unknowingly, for healing; often, they need only a push or an invitation or someone to care enough to take the risk that our Lord took with Zacchaeus. For apart from our love for one another – especially for those who have been justly despised by those around them – there can be no salvation for ourselves. We cannot be saved alone; we can only be saved in communion with one another, for only by looking outside of ourselves, can we grow into that likeness of God that propels one to seek and to save the lost.

The Springtime of Lent approaches! The image of Zacchaeus is indeed the very image of the repentant sinner that the Holy Fathers would have us remember as we all begin to sing on Sunday at Matins: *“Open unto me the gates of repentance, oh Giver of Life....”* Let us walk in the steps of our Master, Brothers and Sisters! Let us look beyond ourselves; let us repent of our sin with our whole hearts; and, let us embrace the sinners around us with the love of Jesus Christ, so that they with us may know the health and beauty and grace of the Lord of salvation – the One Who came *to seek and to save the lost* like us.

**Remember what the LORD has done for you! Give Him thanks and praise! *Glory to His NAME for all things!*** Pray for me, His most unworthy of priests.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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