



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

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### *What Zacchaeus Teaches Us* Week of January 29, 2017

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

*Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19: 1-10)*

At the end of every confession the Orthodox priest asks the penitent, "Are you sorry for your sins? And will you repent of them?" Unless the person making confession answers in the affirmative to both questions, the priest may not grant absolution. For absolution is the restoration of a relationship that

had been broken by sin; reconciliation is only possible if we turn from the sin that had divided us from the Lord.

This Sunday is Zacchaeus Sunday; to me it is nothing less than the harbinger of the Lenten Spring. Next week we begin to use the *Triodion*, on the Sunday that in my Western Christian days we had called Septuagesima, approximately 70 days prior to Easter in the Western calendar. For us it will be the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the week in which we intensify our efforts to identify areas in our lives in which we are in need of repentance. Repentance is truly a grace from God! It is the embodiment of the good news that the Lord gives us a second chance when we turn from our sin.

We all know the story of Zacchaeus, how he climbed up into the sycamore tree above the crowd to see the Lord. When the Lord passed by, however, he stopped and called Zacchaeus down, and proceeded to invite Himself to Zacchaeus' house that day. This would have been a highly unusual act on the part of a Jewish rabbi in first century Israel, for Zacchaeus was hardly a man who could have been seen as righteous by the religious authorities of the day. He had multiple strikes against him, foremost among which were the double facts that he was a tax collector and that he was rich. Even so, Jesus drew near close to him and undoubtedly earned both the wrath and condemnation of the authorities by going into the house of a tax collector and a sinner to eat with him. No teacher or rabbi or religious leader other than our Lord Jesus would have ever done such a thing! For it was He, our Lord and Savior, Who said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost!"

An interesting and important observation about the text above is that when Zacchaeus speaks, he does so not in the future tense, but in the present tense. Zacchaeus does not come to repentance when he meets the Lord; he does not say, "Look, Lord, I **will** give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I **will** restore fourfold." He speaks in the present rather than the future tense; I even checked the Greek text before this writing, and indeed it is so. Zacchaeus says, "Look, Lord, I **give** [present tense!] half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I **restore** [present tense again!] it fourfold."

Repentance, you see, precedes reconciliation. Repentance is not something we should do **after** the sacrament of Confession. We should have repented and changed our lives **before** we come to seek reconciliation with the Lord in Confession. We should come to confession only after we have repented! Repentance denotes change. It means that we have already decided to put the sin behind us that kills our relationship with the Lord. We come to confession, because we have already repented of that sin, and we come, because we seek reconciliation with the One from Whom we have been divided.

This simple text from Luke's Gospel that we will hear on Sunday, the Sunday of Zacchaeus, the harbinger of our Lenten Spring, leaps out at us like none other we will hear. To be sure the Lord loved Zacchaeus even before he had repented; he loves all with a pure and perfect love – saint and sinner, penitent and impenitent. But it is the grace of repentance that draws Him close to us, for only if we repent of our sin, can we ever claim to be in that life-giving and joyful relationship with Him that is salvation.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ: The harbinger of our Lenten Spring is upon us. Let us learn from Zacchaeus by seeking out those places in our life that divide us from the Lord; let us identify those places and turn from them in repentance, praying together from the heart those words that we will hear in Matins next week once again: "Open unto me the doors of repentance, O Giver of Life...." And then, **after** we

have repented of that which divides us from the Lord, let us seek reconciliation with the One Who seeks to save us sinners who would otherwise be truly lost indeed!

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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