

A Short Messiah

Several years ago at St. John's, we had a priest who preached on today's gospel. I remember it well because I remember how irritated I got listening to it.

What was so irritating was his insistence that, in this lesson, we get our one and only physical description of Jesus.

He was short!

So short that Zaccaheus couldn't see him for the crowd. So short that Zach had to climb a tree to get a glimpse of him.

Maybe it's just me, but I never thought of Jesus as being short. Certainly I never thought of him as being "very short". The Messiah should be tall, don't you think?!

He should have a commanding presence, stand out in the crowd; stand over the crowd.

Now, in fact, whether the "short" was referring to Jesus or to Zaccaheus is a very fair question. Most scholars will say the "he who was short" in fact is referring to Zaccaheus, and not to Jesus. And if it does refer to old Zach, then we are right back where we've always been; knowing nothing at all about what Jesus looked like.

I share my irritation with the priest who insisted that Jesus was short because it rings together with all the other folks who were first irritated, and then infuriated by the Jesus who didn't live up to what they thought the Messiah should be.

He should not only be TALL but he should come to reward the FAITHFUL, the RIGHTEOUS, the GOOD FOLKS.

Instead, he came to save the lost, the sinners, the rejects. What kind of Messiah is that!?

And we see it again today.

We have walked with Jesus this year, from Galilee as he heads toward Jerusalem, with Luke as our guide. Along the way, we have heard and seen how Jesus deals with the rich. From the rich youngster who walked away crushed, because his stuff held him captive; to the rich fool whose full barns couldn't buy him another day of life, to the rich man begging Lazarus for a single drop of water.

So when Luke introduces Zach to us today as the chief tax collector (read: Roman collaborator par excellence!) and as RICH, we expect Jesus to skewer him, just like all the other rich folks who have crossed Jesus' path.

But Zach isn't defined by his occupation. Nor is he defined by his wealth. You see, Zach "gets it". He gets it about Jesus.

St. Paul boasts about being a fool for Christ.

Zach is a fool for Christ.

In those days men didn't run. It wasn't dignified. They certainly didn't climb trees!

Yet, there is Zach, so eager to see Jesus, and so unable to see him (because either he or Jesus is so short) that he runs up ahead, in full view of the crowd, and scampers up a tall tree.

Imagine for a moment if, during last year's Palm Sunday parade around the block, if Preston or Stuart ran up ahead and were dangling from a tree branch as we all passed by. You want to laugh out loud at the scene!

But that's Zach! Dangling from a tree branch, like a Christmas ornament, a fool for Christ.

Jesus sees this marvelous, ridiculous, touching display of faith and invites himself over to Zach's for dinner.

And who starts to grumble? All the good people. All those who play by the rules. All those who count themselves in God's camp. "Who is he to eat with a grimy tax collector?" they grumble.

But Zach gets it.

And his response to the salvation that Jesus pronounces on he and his household, is NOT to give thanks that he will go to heaven. It's NOT to congratulate himself that he got on Jesus' guest list.

His response is one that catches a glimpse of the new world that God, through Jesus, is, even today, creating. Zach begins to see that the world God created, the world God intends for us; is a world where we all have enough; where none has too much and where all of us recognize and embrace the fact that all we have is from God.

So Zach's response to salvation is this: He gives half of all he has to those without.

This is what salvation looks like!

It is our own pouring out of what we have for the benefit of one another; because that pouring out follows the pouring out of God, in Jesus, for each and every one of us.

Paul says it like this: "But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; yet being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet; even to accepting death, death on a cross." Phil 2:7

Which gets us back to whether Jesus was short.

And the answer, I think, is that whether he was or wasn't, one thing is for sure: He got down low. Low enough to "stoop with the worst of them. By the time he got to Jerusalem, he didn't have far to fall, ending up between two low down thieves, so short was he, so willing was he to get down and dirty with the lost." Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved*, 112].

This Messiah, unlike any we would expect, invites us into the world that God intends for us. A world of abundance, if only we are generous.

And so, shall we dangle from a tree and give half of what we have to the poor; or shall we stand back, aghast at the short Messiah?

This Jesus always and everywhere presents us with stark choices, no matter our efforts to water him down. As Ghandi said of Jesus: "I think he really meant what he said."

In today's gospel, a camel has passed through the eye of a needle.

A rich man has entered the Kingdom.

May we give as Zaccaheus gave, so that God may do for us what God did for him.

+amen