

Zaccheus Sunday Jan 9, 2017

The story of Christ's encounter with Zaccheus reveals an important dimension of what is meant by the term repentance; that which is called the making of amends. This making amends means literally the attempt to repair or mend something that has been damaged or broken, especially as it concerns relationships, either between people or between people and God.

Making amends should be something that we are all familiar with. We practice this in our daily lives constantly. The desire to make amends appears whenever we realize that, with or without intention, we have injured, offended or in some other way caused harm to another person. If we feel badly about that we will try to say or do something to "make up" for what we have done, (or perhaps failed to do).

Often, especially among Christian people, a simple expression of regret, an apology and or a plea for forgiveness is sufficient to restore good relations. Sometimes, however, the situation calls for more than that – sometimes a lot more. Zaccheus is an example.

My point here this morning is that genuine repentance will always require and include the desire to make amends, whatever that might be. This desire must be from our own heart. It cannot be imposed. In the case of Zaccheus we see that he is inspired to correct his life and make amends as a response to his encounter with Christ. But Christ is not forcing him to do this. Rather Christ's encounter with Zaccheus produces two complimentary movements in Zaccheus' soul. In the first place Zaccheus is seared by the awareness of his sinful life and simultaneously he is inspired by Christ's love for him to correct his life.

According to the Fathers of our Church, this is characteristic of all genuine experience of communion with Christ. The truth of our sin is revealed yet at the same time Christ's love for us is revealed. We experience grief because of the sin, yet at the same time, hope that this sin can be defeated. That which was impossible without Christ becomes possible with Him to help

us. Not easy, but possible. Jesus sees Zaccheus' acceptance of this new possibility and his resolution to make amends and blesses his intention saying, "today salvation has come into this house".

Please note here that Jesus does not just "forgive" Zaccheus in the naïve way many heterodox people, and some misinformed Orthodox as well, like to think about forgiveness and salvation. He does not say to Zaccheus "because you have accepted me as your Lord and Saviour all the bad things you have done no longer have their appropriate consequences. Christ's forgiveness does not alter our moral responsibility. That requires repentance – changing our life, which begins and continues with making amends.

The basic amendment of our lives is what we might call 'generic' Orthodoxy, the foundational repentance that all people who wish to acquire the new life in Christ must undertake; our way of prayer, fasting, worship, etc. This repentance is aimed directly at our common ego-centered human nature and its generic spiritual illness of pride, vanity and self-love. This is the universal human problem. But there is more.

In addition to our common human problem each of us has our own unique version or expression of that problem in our life and therefore we have not only our generic sins but our personal sins to amend. Here is an example from experience:

Before I became an Orthodox Christian I was involved with a version of the old Gnostic heresy. I was a teacher and leader in this group. At a certain point I began to become painfully aware that what I was teaching about God and man was false and led people into a delusional self-centered spirituality. There is little to be gained by dwelling on the details of all this but suffice it to say that I did not feel I could just abandon those people and save myself but must also try and undo as much false teaching as possible for the people who had looked to me for leadership. I still have a strong desire to do anything I can to keep people from those errors or help those affected by them to escape from that. I still look to make amends whenever possible.

I can tell you as a testimony that my desire to make amends for my past has been a great help to me in becoming and growing as an Orthodox Christian. In my times of weakness this need to “make things right” in my life drove me on more effectively than anything else.

Knowing what my desire and determination to make amends has meant to my own life I think I can understand also what so many of our Fathers and Mothers in the Faith meant when they prayed that God would allow them more time in this life to repent – even if that meant illness or other suffering. They did not mean by this time to sit around feeling bad about themselves but rather more time to do good things, not only in compensation of their own sins but beyond that, to acquire the blessing that comes to those who add something beyond themselves for the good of the world and their fellow beings.

The author of “The Little Prince”, Antoine de Saint-Exupery once said that moral greatness derives more from a sense of responsibility than from courage or even honesty. “To be a man” he wrote, “is precisely to be responsible”. That is the message the fox teaches “The Little Prince”. Also our Zaccheus, perhaps for the first time and because of Christ’s visit to him, accepts responsibility for his life and behavior. He becomes by doing so “a man”, a real person which is what we Orthodox mean by the term salvation. Thus Jesus’ declaration that “today salvation has come into this house” has a double meaning. Jesus is salvation incarnate but Zaccheus, in accepting responsibility for his sins has found salvation for himself as well.

Elder Paisios told his spiritual children to acquire “spiritual bravery” in order to take this kind of responsibility for their sins.

One of the great distortions of Christ’s Gospel is the idea that Jesus somehow takes away our responsibility for our lives - that somehow his love and forgiveness negates the consequences of our moral choices. Repentance involves the acceptance of responsibility for those choices not the avoidance of them. Christ’s encounter with Zaccheus doesn’t take away his responsibility, rather it inspires him to exercise it in correcting his life and frees him by this inspiration from his fearful servitude to his baser passions.

Jesus gives him hope and courage, strength of heart, to face his demons, and with Christ's help, to conquer them.

Have you had this same experience as Zaccheus? Or perhaps you have had it but it has faded over time and your sin has risen up again and looms larger – intimidating you into fearful anxieties. We need our strength renewed and where shall we find this renewal except in an encounter with Christ. He is our salvation.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has a good word for us in this regard, “if, as we prepare for Lent, there is a real eagerness in our hearts (like Zaccheus), if we have an intense desire for a clearer vision of Christ, then our hopes will be fulfilled during the fast; indeed, we shall, like Zaccheus, receive far more than we expect”.

May God grant that this intense desire for a deeper encounter with Christ, will grow in us over the next several weeks and guide us all to a blessed repentance.

Amen