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Salvation for Rich and Poor

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Salvation for Rich and Poor

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Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for November 3, 2013 for Cycle C:

Wis 11:23-12:2; Ps 145; 2 Thes 1:11-2:2; Lk 19:1-10

SALVATION FOR RICH AND POOR

Lawrence E. Frizzell

"The fullness of the Gospel message about life was prepared for in the Old Testament. Especially in the Exodus, the center of the Old Testament faith experience, Israel discovered the preciousness of its life in the eyes of God. When it seemed doomed to extermination because of the threat of death hanging over all its newborn males (Ex 1:15-22), the Lord revealed himself to Israel as its Savior, with the power to ensure a future to those without hope. Israel came to know clearly that its existence is not at the mercy of Pharaoh who can exploit it at his despotic whim. On the contrary, Israel's life is the object of God's gentle and intense love" (Pope John Paul II. *The Gospel of Life* #31).

Long before the Holy Father and even Mother Church reflected on the Exodus and the meaning of God's plan for the chosen people, the teachers and poets of Israel celebrated the Passover and sought to understand its message. Thus, about a century before Jesus pointed to the Exodus as the framework for his work of redemption, a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria composed a lengthy meditation (Wis 11:2-19:22) on the events in Egypt and in the wilderness at the time Israel became a nation. The passage proclaimed this Sunday is taken from a reflection on God's power and mercy (11:17-12:22). The plagues showed how divine power prevailed over the obstinacy of Pharaoh; they are contrasted with the signs of God's mercy toward the Israelites in the desert. As a call for Pharaoh and the Egyptians to repent for their sins and to cooperate with the divine plan, the plagues progressed from irksome inconveniences to the grievous burden constituted by death of the first-born. Even that was but a measured retaliation for the decree of Pharaoh against all Hebrew male babies. "The measure with which you measure will in turn be measured out to you" (Lk 6:38).

In prayer the Church marvels that divine power is manifested most in mercy. "You overlook the sins of people that they may repent" (Wis 11:23), a point that is echoed in the verse that closes this section of the poem. "You rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, so that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O Lord!" (12:2).

The Gospels offer many examples of Jesus bringing divine mercy and forgiveness to sinners. The story of Zacchaeus (whose name means "innocent, clean") shows how the curiosity of a tax collector, reputed to be a sinner because of his unsavory occupation, leads to his conversion and new sensitivity to the rights of others. Did Jesus smile at the comical sight of a well-dressed man peering down from a tree? Perhaps the very incongruity of the situation offered Jesus an occasion to request hospitality. Those who murmured about the bad example that Jesus was setting had not heard his reply at the occasion of Levi's conversion. "I have not come to call the righteous to

repentance but sinners" (Lk 5:22). In this case, the host speaks up for himself. He is aware that repentance must show itself in acts of justice and deeds of mercy. "Behold, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over" (19:8). If this were merely hypocritical boasting, Zacchaeus would have been reprimanded by the Lord. Moreover, if cases of fraud and inflation of the tax rates were numerous, Zacchaeus would not have enough funds to make restitution from the residue of his estate. So he was not the worst of crooks, but a man who had neglected and cheated others as he feathered his own nest.

The very presence of Jesus, whose name means "the Lord saves," brings salvation (true wholeness and peace) to this man and his household. Because tax collectors cooperated with the oppressive grip that the Romans exerted on Judea and Galilee, they were despised as traitors. But Jesus restores to this man his dignity as a child of Abraham. Indeed, life could be difficult, but God is always faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs. "God is mindful of the oath sworn to Abraham our father and will grant that, rescued from the hand of our enemies, without fear we might worship him in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (Lk 1:73-75).

"Today salvation has come to this house..." (19:9). Besides the play on the meaning of the name of Jesus, the term "today" is important in this Gospel (see 2:11; 4:21; 23:43). The progressive revelation of Jesus is offered to poor shepherds and to rich bureaucrats, to the people of Nazareth and to the thief on the cross. Do we sense the presence of Christ in the ordinary as well as the sublime moments of our lives?