

February 5, 2006

St. Agatha of Sicily

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Today's pilgrim, standing on Mount Nebo and gazing westward on a clear day, is blessed to see the Holy Land rather much as Moses beheld it more than three thousand years ago. Many features of the landscape will claim his notice, but perhaps none more strongly than a long, wide, curving line of deep green that wends its way down from the north. Our pilgrim is looking at the serpentine journey of the Jordan River, and the rich green that he sees are the myriad trees that grow along both its banks. Among these trees, too indistinct to be discerned from so great a distance, stand the stately sycamores that have been native to the Jordan Valley since the third day of Creation. Before the heavenly bodies were yet established, those sycamores already sank their roots and held their ground along the Jordan shores, waiting to greet the first appearance of the moon and the stars on the following night.

Christ our Lord, less than two weeks before His death on the cross for our salvation, was walking south along that same path through the stately sycamores of the Jordan, surrounded by a large group of people crowding about to see Him. Glancing up into the trees, freshly adorned with the newness of spring, Jesus caught sight of a man sitting out on a branch of one of the ancient sycamores. The quality of his clothing testified that this was a man of means and dignity. He had somehow contrived to get up that sycamore tree, for the sole purpose of gaining a good look at Jesus, for he feared that his diminutive height and the press of the crowd would otherwise prevent his seeing Him. This man knew as well as anyone, of course, that grown up and dignified men do not climb into trees, at least not along a public road and in full sight of a large crowd,

Perhaps this is the first thing to be noted about our tree climber--he thought a great deal less of his own dignity than he did about seeing Jesus. He was prepared to sacrifice his pride, his reputation, and his self-respect in order to look at Jesus. Knowing that God resists the proud but gives His grace to the humble, he climbed the sycamore tree in lowliness of heart, ironically attaining the exaltation promised to those who humble themselves. He did what only the humble can do. He gazed upon Jesus, who reveals Himself to the humble.

A second observation to be made about this man is that Jesus, when he glanced up, called him by name. We must observe that Jesus already knew this man's name. Moreover, Jesus not only knew the man's name; He peered into and read the man's soul. He gazed into the heart of this humble tree-climber and called out to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down." The One whose eyes search

into the hearts of men knew exactly why this well-dressed man was up in the tree, and, being the Good Shepherd, He called His sheep to Him by name.

Zacchaeus at this time was far from perfect. Indeed, in spite of this recent effort of humility, he was perhaps a bit of a stuffed shirt and braggadocio. Truly, there is something embarrassing about his boast: "I give half my goods to the poor!" Apparently he had not yet learned that those who follow Jesus are called to give up *everything*, not just half. No matter. He was halfway along the way of the Cross, and our Lord accepted him as he was. Zacchaeus had already demonstrated that he was on the path of humility, and that was sufficient. We don't have to be perfect before Jesus calls us by name.

Thirdly, by his act of climbing the tree, Zacchaeus became a symbol of Jesus Himself, who was walking south through Jericho that day on His way to Jerusalem, where He too would climb a tree for man's salvation. Hanging and dying on that wood, the great Creator of the sycamore would shed His blood to redeem Zacchaeus and all mankind. The Good Shepherd not only calls each sheep of His flock by name; He also lays down his life for them.

In the final words of this story (Luke 19:1-10), Jesus proclaims, "the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost." This is, after all, a story about the Good Shepherd finding a lost sheep named Zacchaeus, and it was a mark of this man's wisdom that he would not let himself get lost in the crowd. He made a point of being conspicuous; lost sheep are more easily found that way. There he was in the tree, standing out by humility and self-abasement. Jesus, Himself meek and humble of heart, was able to read the heart of Zacchaeus, and He found that heart to be like unto His own. Jesus would not leave Zacchaeus in the self-abasement of that sycamore branch. "Make haste, He said, "and come down," for today I must stay at your house."

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