

“Today salvation has come to this house” (Part Two)

Reflection 14 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

You remember Zacchaeus’s response to Jesus in Luke 19:1-10, that he would give half his possessions to the poor and pay back anyone he had cheated of anything four times the amount, going way beyond the law’s requirement for restitution (which was 20%). With this Zacchaeus had entered a realm of radical grace. And it is this Jesus refers to when he says, “Today salvation has come to this house.” This is the meaning of salvation in the next verse too, verse 10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

We have usually taken the expression “to save what was lost” to mean conversion, and conversion in the restricted sense of “preserving an individual for heaven and from hell.” But here Jesus is saying: There is so much that is wrong in this world, and it must be made right. There is so much that is unjust, and those injustices cannot stand. A great many people are lost. All you have to do is look in their eyes or look at their lives or consider the last big life decision they have made to know that they are lost. They have no idea what to do or where to go. They are lost. There are families falling apart. There are those who are poor, in fact, billions of them. There are those who have been defrauded. All of these must be saved, rescued, delivered, kept safe, made whole.

So here in Zacchaeus’s case, his “being saved” does refer to conversion, yes, a dramatically radical change, but not in any private sense at all. Today salvation has come to this house: To this family and these servants! To the poor who become beneficiaries! To all who may have been defrauded! It changes everything. Zacchaeus’s salvation has personal, domestic, social and economic dimensions; it’s “saved” as in “made well or made whole.” And it changes everything. And the point is that all of life is affected by Jesus’ ministry. It’s the coming of God’s reign into every aspect of life, and life and death and life after death become a seamless tapestry.

Salvation is very much “on earth as it is in heaven.” It’s hands-on, here-and-now, and it makes a difference in real life. And it’s holistic; it affects the whole of life. It’s God’s new order on earth as it is in heaven. So when the hungry are fed and the homeless sheltered, salvation has come to us. When restitution has been made to those defrauded in one way or another, salvation has come to us. When young boys and girls with fathers in prison have other strong male presences in their lives, salvation has come to us. When men and women are freed, one day at a time, from addictions to drink or drugs or sex, salvation has come to us. When a man given to violence and verbal abuse learns a new way to relate to his family, salvation has come to us. When the fabulously affluent people of America get involved in the South Bronx or in Bridgeport, and invest their time and money and dreams in such places, salvation has come to us. When the churchgoers in America stop making excuses for not helping the poor in our nation, salvation has come to us.

And, yes, there is risk and danger. I think of Shiloh’s work. In the mid-70s almost 100 full-time year-round staffers worked for Shiloh in various inner-city neighborhoods in the New York City

area. One was Phil Roseberry. He was slated to be the next executive director of Shiloh, and his wife Donna was pregnant. Then on the evening of June 30th, 1975, in East New York, Phil walked two other staffers, both single women, home to their apartment just across the street. Taking a short cut home back to his place he ran down a side stairwell in their building, and apparently came across a drug deal in progress, and was shot dead. So there will be risk, but really there is no other way to live, and certainly no other way for salvation to come to us than by people taking risks for others.

When anyone works to see that things are done on earth as they are in heaven, salvation has come to us. Salvation changes everything. It's the stingiest man in Jericho deciding to give half his possessions to the poor and repaying four times over anyone he's defrauded of anything. The questions must always be: What's changing around here? What's changing in our lives? Are the ways the poor have been defrauded being corrected and redeemed? Are the hungry being fed? Are people being liberated from the things that have bound and restricted them? It's all being part of Christ's new order on earth.

What's critical is to realize that salvation begins here and now, that God is always doing great things, and that we have only to open our eyes to see what God is doing all around us. What is the what of salvation? What does salvation feel like? How do you suppose Zacchaeus felt that day when Jesus left him? I'd suppose he felt loved and accepted, relieved and liberated, clean again, his burdens lifted, and part of God's family again. In fact, that's exactly what Jesus said of Zacchaeus: that "this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

Salvation spells R.E.L.I.E.F. It's the relief of a hungry person being fed. It's the relief of the homeless having a home. It's the relief of being freed from addiction. It's the relief of being free from the hold that sin has in my life. It's the relief that comes from finally being able to let go of my stuff – giving half of it away to the poor. And, yes, it takes new birth, a change so radical that it's like starting over, experiencing again forgiveness, feeling clean again, and finding within yourself the Spirit of God.

– Dale Pauls