

*'...the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.'*

Today's readings tell us something about God's purpose for us and about how we can progress that purpose through genuine prayer.

In the first reading Isaiah tells us that God is not interested in '...worthless assemblies' or '...meaningless offerings'. These 'prayers' are 'detestable' to Him. Hypocrisy is obvious to God. Insincere 'prayer' is of no value.

God wants us to have a better relationship with him and with his creation. As in any relationship communication is essential. That is why prayer is so important. Communication can be difficult but silence before the Lord is not an option. The psalms tell us..... 'when I kept silent, my bones wasted away...my strength was sapped as in the heat of the summer'.

St Paul gives us very good example by praying that we will succeed in '... every desire for goodness and in every deed prompted by faith'. His prayer of supplication is preceded by thanksgiving for each other. St Paul tells us 'we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters'.

In order to pray in this sincere way we need to start by giving thanks and to proceed by acknowledging our failings. It is a question of integrity. Our 'confession' is urgent. It gives our prayer momentum and it enables us to move forward. That is why Isaiah tells us that when we pray we should '...stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.'

Our prayers, our 'assemblies' and our 'offerings' do not need to be meaningless or insincere. They must never become narcissistic. Thriving relationships require more honesty and greater regard for others. Lived with this integrity our lives could become forms of living prayer. We could be more confident and more hopeful. Even '..the rising of the mighty waters...' would not trouble us.

In today's world there are many victims of injustice. Our globe is warming and our tides are rising. Millions of people are oppressed and in our own city thousands of people are homeless. Our prayers could make a difference if we learnt from Zacchaeus and did as he did when he told Jesus '...if I have cheated anybody out of anything I will pay back four times the amount'. By doing this Zacchaeus the tax collector was reunited with his true family 'as a son of Abraham'. He was no longer lost. He was found by Jesus Christ.

Think of what we could achieve if our prayers and our actions were brought into this more redemptive harmony. Our species and our environment are in great danger. Scripture pleads with us to take care of each other and our world. We have been created in his image and we live in a beautiful world of his making. At his incarnation hosts of angels sang for joy reminding us that 'heaven and earth are full of His glory'. It was Our Lord who

taught us the greatest environmental prayer when he asked us to pray that 'his will be done...on earth and in heaven'.

Like Zacchaeus we have lost our way. Just like him we need a new vantage point from which to see each other and our world in a different way. Genuine prayer gives us this vantage point. The sins confessed by Zacchaeus high on a tree in Jericho were redeemed high on another tree at Calvary. We do not need to be afraid. We have the example of Zacchaeus. He was as good as his word. He made amends for his mistakes and his prayers were answered. Our prayers will also be heard if we pray as Isaiah said we must, praying to the...'defence of the oppressed, to the cause of the fatherless and to the care of the widows...'

We can achieve greater justice and even stem '...the rising tides...' but to do all this our prayers will need to be more sincere, more authentic and more generous than our old 'worthless assemblies' and '...appointed festivals'.

Let us pray today that we become more like Zacchaeus and in doing so that we come to know the one who 'came into this earth to seek us and to save us' for eternal life.