

Next Services

**Saturday
January 27th**

**Great Vespers at 5:00
pm**

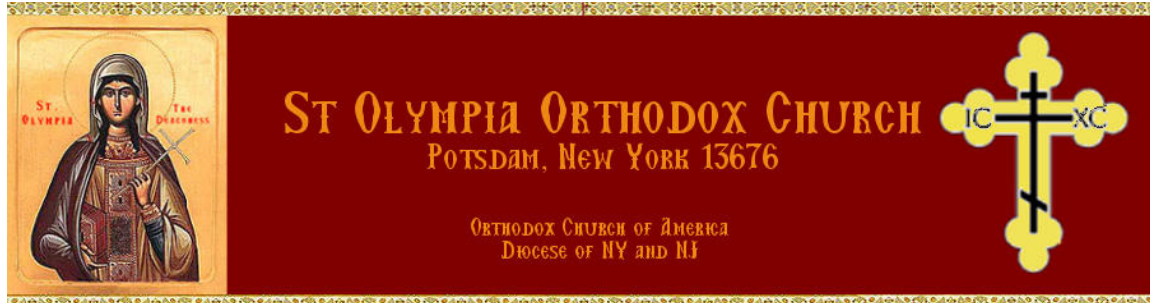
**Sunday
January 28th**

**Divine Liturgy at 10:00
am**

both at

**St. Olympia Chapel
123 Main Street
Potsdam, NY**

All welcome!



**Welcome to St. Olympia Orthodox Church,
a young and, God willing, growing community of worshippers.**

**Join us for prayer and fellowship.
Divine Liturgies are held every Sunday and are primarily in English.
Fr. Luke Majoros is our presbyter.**

Zacchaeus Sunday (Luke 19:1-10)

*Note: the following article has been written by an anonymous contributor.
It is included here by permission.*

As hard as it is to believe, it's already Zacchaeus Sunday; and Great Lent is right around the corner. And we begin our run-up to Lent and Pascha with this Gospel, Luke 19:1-10, because in the Lord's encounter with Zacchaeus we find hope and healing for us and for everybody, not when we're on our best behavior, but when our behavior is enough to break God's heart. Now, when I was a child, the story of Zacchaeus was one of my favorites; and I suspect it still is a favorite with every kid who feels small or unwanted or rejected and longs simply to be noticed with love. But Luke didn't record this event for children. He recorded it for adults with the guts to face the fact that they're broken, that they've messed up, and who are sick to death of the self-serving, ego-massaging lies they have to tell themselves about themselves.

So let's begin with Zacchaeus: one of those people Jesus seemed to like being around. The people with whom Jesus spent most of his time with, the people with whom He liked to sit down to dinner, the people upon whom He seemed to lavish most of His attention were exactly the people for whom most "decent" folks then and now wouldn't have the time of day: people who seemed slightly demented in their behavior, the social misfits, the ne'er-do-wells, the deviant portion of the population we wouldn't dream of inviting into our homes. In Matthew 9:11 we find the Pharisees grilling our Lord's followers: "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And two chapters later, in Matthew 11:19 Jesus Himself reflects wryly on the way His critics call Him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." And Zacchaeus certainly fit in with that crowd.

For one thing he was "rich," actually filthy rich--but not because he had worked hard all his life, saved his pennies, lived frugally and invested wisely. Rather, he was rich because he was "a chief tax collector." More accurately, he was a chief toll collector. Zacchaeus was not the guy sitting in the toll booth and actually collecting the tariffs, duties and taxes the Romans charged the local populace. Zacchaeus was more like a local franchise owner. He'd managed to buy from the Roman authorities the contract to collect all the tolls in his region; so he was the one who managed the whole system. And it was a system that stunk to high heaven. The guys who actually collected the money charged people more than the figure the Romans demanded, then skimmed the difference for themselves. And Zacchaeus was at the top of the heap; he was the guy who skimmed off the top of those who skimmed off the top. To put it bluntly, Zacchaeus was a career criminal who'd managed to make it big; and there wasn't a richer man in town--or a sleazier one.

So when the famous Rabbi Jesus from Nazareth came through town, the One renowned for preaching righteousness and compassion and mercy and love, the people of Jericho crowded the streets for a glimpse of Him, and likely hoped that Jesus would have a few well-chosen and stinging words for that old scum bag Zacchaeus, so devoid of righteousness, compassion, mercy and love for his neighbors. Their attitude was "Give him hell, Rabbi! Tell him to wise up, to clean up his act--or better yet, to get outta town!"

Oddly, though, Zacchaeus himself had tried to get a ring-side seat for the action. And surely that was fool-hardy, reckless, almost suicidal. Being out on a street so packed with people that Zacchaeus couldn't even get a glimpse of Jesus, because he was too short, was almost daring all the people who hated him to stick a knife in his ribs and disappear into the crowd. Was Zacchaeus so arrogant in his power and wealth that he thought nobody would even think of touching him? Perhaps.

But what's important is that Zacchaeus was drawn to Jesus. Maybe it was just curiosity to see this celebrity; maybe he was just bored with counting his money and this was something to while away a hot afternoon. Or maybe it was the rumors Zacchaeus couldn't help hearing about this Rabbi's habit of hanging around with the wrong kind of people. What kind of rabbi liked to just sit and chat and swap stories with hookers, toll collectors, and guys who never darkened the synagogue's door? This Zacchaeus had to see; and he was so determined that he climbed a sycamore tree so that he could see more than the backs of his neighbors. It was then that Jesus spotted him, maybe sitting on a tree branch with his chicken legs dangling there over a limb, looking ridiculous, desperate just to see. "Zacchaeus," said Jesus, "make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house."

Luke doesn't say whether Zacchaeus climbed out of the tree or fell out of it, astonished that Jesus both knew who he was and had invited Himself to dinner. But in any case, Zacchaeus "made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully." And that's when all of a sudden things got very, very quiet. At first, the "good" people of Jericho stood in shock at what they were seeing and hearing. Some of them probably started snickering up their sleeves. "For a smart young rabbi, He's pretty naïve, isn't He? He sure doesn't know much about people!" But then, when they realized that Jesus knew exactly who and what Zacchaeus was, "they all complained, saying, 'He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.' He can't be serious! There isn't a bigger crook in the county! Has He lost his marbles?" This was no joke. This was a scandal.

Ah, but that's exactly one of the points Jesus is trying to make here: that there was and always is this resistance to the reality that Jesus is. What bothered the "good" people of Jericho was not so much what Jesus had to say to them, but the way He said it. It is one thing to believe in loving your neighbor, to believe in welcoming the lost, to believe in forgiving the guilty; but it's quite another thing to actually do it, to practice what you preach. That's what bothered people about Jesus and what still bothers people about Jesus. He not only said that we should love God and one another; He actually went out and did it. He didn't just say God's embrace was wide enough to welcome everyone; he actually went out and embraced the people no one else would. And that upset the carefully-constructed social order of have and have-not, good guys and bad guys, us and them.

And it still does. Just as pious Jews in our Lord's day made a habit of labeling people in order to define the boundaries of what was important to them, so have Christians. At one point in Christian history, only people of "good moral character" and, preferably, impeccable social credentials, were deemed worthy to be welcomed into the church community, because Christians had a vested interest in making the Church look respectable once it had gained the acceptance of the surrounding culture; so no soldiers or stage actors need apply. That's why some of the parables of Jesus, like the parable of the man who had two sons, and some of the incidents involving Jesus, like how He dealt with the woman caught committing adultery, caused considerable controversy in the early Church, such that some manuscripts of John's Gospel totally omit the incident of the woman taken in adultery. These things made Jesus look like a flake, like somebody who at times didn't have very good judgment. The story of Zacchaeus was another. Yes, Zacchaeus demonstrates a repentance willing to make amends to those he'd hurt: "Look, Lord, I give half my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation [by defrauding them], I restore fourfold." But for Pharisees then and now, that doesn't soften the blow, because Jesus actually forgives, accepts, and restores to his place among God's People this lowest of the low: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham." And in case the Pharisees weren't getting the message, Jesus spells it out: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. All these people that you think are so bad, so hopeless, are nothing of the sort. They're just lost and need to be found."

And for us, that's both good news and bad news. The bad news is that this incident rips from us any supposed moral or spiritual superiority over even the worst of the worst. The only difference between us and them is that they're still lost and needing to be found, while we've been found and are in the process of being cleaned up. Jesus wants them back as much as He wants us and, on the Cross, made the amends we'd never be able to make. But that's also the good news: that in the end, this is about the continuing scandal and lunacy of a God who can't and won't stop searching for us and welcoming us back, no matter how lost we get. So as we take our first steps today in our journey to Great Lent and Holy Pascha, we hear the good news that, in incredible and indescribable love, God welcomes people who, if nothing else, just can't resist scrambling up whatever branch is handy just to catch a glimpse of what it would be like to be back home.



Fr. Luke and the parish celebrate the return of Mother Sophronia after her extended stay at Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery and welcome back Jessica Suchy-Pilis who has been traveling while on sabbatical.



Every year in preparation for the Great Fast of Lent and Holy Pascha, the Church offers us several Sunday Gospel lessons as food for prayer and reflection.

The Holy Fathers, many of whom wrote inspiring commentaries, were enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see deeper levels of meaning contained in these Gospel passages and they encourage us to do so also. Taking this approach, and borrowing from the wisdom of Blessed Theophylact of Bulgaria and St. Ambrose of Milan, let us briefly consider a few highlights of the story of the encounter between the Lord Jesus and Zacchaeus.

The story begins by telling us that Jesus was passing through the city of Jericho. Now Jericho was notorious in its history as a "sin city" and became synonymous with a sinful lifestyle in general. And Zacchaeus was living a sinful life. Identified in the Gospel as a chief Publican, he was by profession, a corrupt government tax collector. It was common practice to pad the tax bills so as to make a profit that the Publican pocketed at the expense of already overtaxed middle and lower classes. In fact he had acquired considerable wealth by defrauding his fellow citizens.

Luke then tells us that "he sought to see Jesus, who He was." That is to say Zacchaeus hoped not just to have a look at Jesus walking by, at His outward appearance, but desired to have an encounter with Him. We cannot know, or even form an impression of who a person is without face-to-face encounter.

St. Ambrose sees the short stature of Zacchaeus, lost in the crowd, and his running ahead to climb a tree, as a parallel to our need to run ahead of and rise above the "crowd" of the passions and worldly affairs in order to see and come to know Jesus, who stopped and looked up at Zacchaeus as He came by. The Lord will approach anyone who makes an effort to see Him.

The iconography of the story captures for us the moment of personal encounter between the Lord and Zacchaeus and by analogy, between the Lord and ourselves. As we gaze prayerfully upon this icon, as we listen attentively to the words of the Gospel, we await the Lord to shine the light of His countenance on us too. Our upcoming Lenten efforts to "run ahead and climb a tree" through fasting, alms giving and prayer will draw the Lord's merciful gaze toward us.

As it was for Zacchaeus, so may it be for us sinners, an encounter with the Lord, that like Him we may be granted the gift of salvation.

--Mother Sophronia