

## 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

If I wasn't the brightest bulb in the marquee back in my teens, neither did I consider myself the dullest knife in the drawer. So the first time I was handed a Rubik's Cube, I thought, I can do this. And so I twisted it, turned it, studied it, and scrutinized it. Eventually I began muttering to it, getting angry at it, and threatening it. What I never could do, was finish it. To say I found the thing frustrating is putting it mildly; I think I could rip the thing apart with my bare hands before I could ever figure it out. Over time, I learned that it was not just the Rubik's Cube that would vex me, it was and is virtually all of those little "brain teaser" puzzles. My dad used to make them out of wood, out in his shop; I could never solve them. Parishioners fashioned them out of metal; the results were beyond my grasp. Anyone could show me how to do the things: within minutes, the solutions left me. I came to the conclusion that some brains are just wired better to think outside the box, to see solutions which are not apparent, and to catch details which are not obvious. For people like me, though, such puzzles are frustrating, because when doing them, I know that there's a solution, I know there's an explanation, but I just can't see it.

Man has sometimes had a similar difficulty figuring out God: who he is, why he made us, what he wants from us. God created man so that we would long for him, our Creator, even without him revealing himself. Over time, man looked for God in things: in fire, in water, in the stars, atop the mountain. Man tried to understand God's power, but then fashioned in his own mind multiple gods who were at once both powerful and fickle. But the solution to man's yearning was never far off; the one true God revealed himself to man slowly, throughout the ages, in the fullness of time. The solutions were there; we just had to recognize them. In the book of Wisdom, the scriptures gave the Israelites a lot of insight into God: of God it says "you have mercy on all, you overlook people's sins that they may repent. And this is so true: if God had no mercy, there would be no reason to repent; what good would repentance do us if we were going to be condemned anyway? "You love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made." God hates no one; he hates certain actions, but he didn't create those actions, those things were freely chosen against his will by his creation, and God doesn't fashion, or will, man's bad choices; only man's good ones. But man himself, God loves. Continues the Wisdom writer: "therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you." God corrects us, he corrects us gently and he does so to get results—not just so that he can vent. And so, for man to uncover God, all he had to do was figure it out: listen to those whom God used to reveal himself, and then imitate his ways.

Shortly after the time of our Lord's ascension, the early Church had to deal with another tricky little problem: the second coming. It was a widespread expectation that Christ would return again soon, and the epicenter of much of the confusion and concern seemed to be in Thessalonica, and so, both of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians have extensive teaching on the reality of the second coming. Their biggest concerns seemed to have been: one, why hadn't Jesus returned already? He was supposed to come right back, or so they thought. Two, what should we do while we wait? What's the point in working at labor if the day of the Lord is right at hand? And third, what if he came and we missed it? What if we missed our salvation? That's why Paul wrote to them "with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, do not be shaken out of your minds suddenly, or be alarmed by an oral statement or a letter allegedly from us to the effect" that the second coming has already happened. He told them, essentially, to figure it out: if Jesus hadn't returned yet, then perhaps God has a bigger vision for humanity than man does; perhaps God envisions more souls in heaven than we can even fathom. So go about life as if his coming is delayed; but be prepared for eternity, as if his coming is tonight.

If man first struggled to figure out who God is, and later wrestled with understanding our ultimate destination, even more of a challenge was understanding how we could get to that destination to be with God. And one of the biggest puzzles for man to tackle was the issue of wealth. Jesus not only talked about it, he talked about it a lot. And at one point, a wealthy young man comes to Jesus and asks what he needs to do to be perfect, and Jesus tells him to sell all he has, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow him. And the rich man goes away sad, because he had many things, and apparently did not want to part with them just so that he could follow Jesus. And Jesus told his listeners "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Whoa. And I couldn't figure out a Rubik's cube; and these people were presented with the challenge of understanding how you get a camel through the eye of a needle. The fur, maybe, but the whole camel? But then, not long after that exchange, another wealthy man encounters Jesus, a man named Zacchaeus. The first man went away from Jesus sad; Zacchaeus is so excited about just laying eyes on this incredible teacher he had heard about, that he ran, fast, ahead of the rest of the crowd, and climbed a tree to get a better look, because he couldn't see over the rest of them. And Zacchaeus solves it, how a wealthy man can enter heaven; he solved the problem of how you get a camel through the eye of a needle. Zacchaeus told Jesus "behold, half of my wealth I shall give away." He didn't have to submit himself to abject poverty—he just had to be generous. "I shall give that wealth to the poor." Even though he was not personally responsible for their poverty, he would show concern for the less fortunate. "If I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over." He would atone for his past misdeeds; he would render justice to those around him. And

voila—whether because the camel gets so small, or the eye of the needle grows so large, the camel passes through the needle’s eye. And Jesus said to him “today salvation has come to this house.” Salvation came to Zacchaeus, because Zacchaeus figured it out.

We live in a day and age in which the practice of the Christian faith is in many ways more difficult: arguably, the temptations to sin are more common and harder to avoid, and as far as material possessions go, we have things that centuries ago, people not only didn’t dream of possessing, they couldn’t even dream of these things existing. But we live in an easier time, too, and it’s part of the beauty of being part of a two-thousand year old Church, and having a Bible which goes back nearly to the beginning of the Church, and two millennium of insights from brilliant theologians who pondered these great mysteries—so much of it has been figured out for us. Salvation isn’t automatic, but God hasn’t made it hard to grasp, either. It’s actually pretty clear: practice mercy, justice, generosity, and charity towards others; sacrifice, self-denial, discipline with ourselves; trust, patience, and obedience towards God; and there you have it: the kingdom, waiting for us at the end. Jesus said at the end of the passage from today’s Gospel that he came to seek and save what was lost. So mostly what we need to do, is not run from him. Not run away from the challenge to live a holy life; not run away from the graces he offers us through his Church; not run away from his mercy; not shy away from sharing in his suffering and his sacrifice. The Wisdom writer, Saint Paul, and Zacchaeus all figured it out: if we love others as God loves, serve God and others as he has served us; imitate Christ’s love, and follow him unreservedly, Christ will not only dwell with us in our homes—he will take us at the end to dwell with him in his.

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