

## November 9 – 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Genesis: 28: 11-18      Truly the Lord is in this spot, although I did not know it.  
1 Corinthians 3: 9-13, 16-17      For the wisdom of this world is foolish in the eyes of God.  
Luke 19: 1-10      Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over.

In 1994, I had the privilege and great joy to be on the African continent on Nelson Mandela's inauguration day, a celebration of his democratic election to the presidency, and the historic end of apartheid in South Africa. In the preceding years, I had worked in East Africa and been painfully aware that over the years Africa had little to celebrate. But on this day, it was not only South Africans who rejoiced. Africans across the continent were jubilant at one of the most remarkable achievements in modern history. Against so many odds, apartheid, one of the most brutal, unjust political systems, was nonviolently dismantled, and the cornerstone of it all was the leadership of Nelson Mandela.

In prison for 27 years, with little or no hope he would ever see outside the walls, Mandela and like-minded men and women daily committed themselves to a vision. Church leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu shared the dream and provided leadership for their congregations, all toward that vision. Mandela, his colleagues and supporters never gave up hope, never gave up the struggle, and disciplined themselves to a clear vision of what they hoped to live out one day. It was not leadership designed to assure themselves of power, but to liberate the poorest among them, forgive their captors and torturers, and move forward to live in peace.

This past week our own country has voted for new leadership. At the writing of this article, I do not know the election's outcome. But no matter the victor, whether we are jubilant and hopeful, or discouraged and angry, the challenge of leadership and our role in relation to our new leader remains.

As Paul tells us in Corinthians today, laying foundations depends not upon destroying what is there, but building new hope brick by brick, based on the foundation of Christ. We are God's co-workers. Our parties have been sharply divided by national security, economy, blame, charges of racism, sexism to name but a few. Can we find the good that is in each person, each place, and find a way to build and rebuild?

Today's readings provide powerful stories and words, so appropriate for this week of new beginnings in a country that has been fraught with so many problems. In Genesis, we continue a story that in modern parlance would be a story of greed, hatred and lust. Jacob, after a vivid dream in which God assures him, "Know that I am with you," awakens to exclaim, "Truly the Lord is in this spot, although I did not know it." Reading the entire story of Jacob and his brother Esau, we can be left at varying points in the story wondering who is the "good guy" and who is the "bad guy." Each brother tries to win their father's favor in order to inherit his wealth, his land, and ultimately receive his blessing as the "master" of all peoples. But this story of lies and deceit, of trying to win it all, is ultimately a story of redemption. In the end, though he made many mistakes, Jacob wins God's favor. He recognizes the holiness of the place in which he dwells, and that

truly the Lord is there with him. He vows that he will return a portion of all that is given to him back to the Lord.

One of the first phrases students of Swahili learn in East Africa is the simple, but powerful phrase *Mungu yupo*: “God is here.” Often, when I felt frustrated or hopeless about an inability to solve a problem, a local person would pull me up short with a gentle reminder that “God is here.”

I remember so well one terrifying period of time in a remote area of Kenya called Bura Tana when large groups of bandits, armed with weapons smuggled from Somalia, staged a series of raids on our village, night after night. One morning, after a terrifying night spent cowering under my bed, I approached a group of village women who were chatting and laughing. “Aren’t you scared?” I asked. “Yes,” they replied, “of course we are scared, but *Mungu yupo* – God is here!” “Yes,” I said, “*Mungu yupo*, but...”

My sentence was interrupted by howls of laughter – uncontrollable laughter. I asked them what I had said that was so funny. One woman looked at me and shook her head. “You said ‘*Mungu yupo*, BUT!’ There is no ‘but...’ *Mungu yupo* – God is here. That is all we have, and that is enough.”

That poor village, with no security, no assets, no barricades, and no stockpile of weapons, comes to mind today when I hear the words of Paul, reminding us that “the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God.”

These are hard words. I think of my own “security issues,” not just fears for safety, but also my attempts to secure my future, and my belief that if I can just make enough money, invest wisely, all will be well. I will be safe and secure into the latter years of my life.

Even as I am asked by one charity to give for food for the poor, by another to provide medicines for those who are ill, by another to help provide clean water for this village, and another to give the hope of education to a child in Africa; I sometimes stop to think that perhaps I do not have enough yet in savings, in retirement, and perhaps it is best to save it for now.

Wall Street had stood as a unique monument to the falsity of those beliefs. It had become for us the “God that is here.” We were confounded in what we believed was our wisdom, and our security has been shaken to its very foundation. One day in September our monument suddenly became for us a monument to greed and corruption.

Today’s Gospel brings it all into sharp focus. Zaccheus, the “short man” desperately wants to see Jesus, and so climbs a tree – goes out on a limb, so to speak – to see him. And it is there, rather than in the thick of the crowd, that Jesus does see him and invites him into relationship. “Today I will go to your house,” Jesus tells him. Zaccheus has been a tax collector, and, it would seem, not a totally honorable one at that. But again, as Jesus does with each one of us, He invites him to conversion. And, the Gospel tells us, Zaccheus not only accepts, he joyfully accepts and proclaims, “Behold half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I will repay it fourfold.” And Jesus replies “Today salvation has come to this house...”

This is a day we are invited to reflect on the words of scripture and think about leadership, redemption, and conversion. Our own future and our global future depends upon us. We are all participants in that future. Let us take an example from the country of South Africa, a country which held a National Service of Thanksgiving after their

election. Those who had suffered decades of terrible oppression, violence and poverty, stood together with their leadership and thus prayed:

“Throughout the land we stand on the threshold of a new experience of national unity. We are a people composed of many races, many languages, many religious traditions, many political parties, many cultures. We are poor and rich, women and men, young and old...

“We acknowledge the presence of Christ among us who reconciles the world. We struggled against one another: now we are reconciled to struggle for one another. We believed it was right to withstand one another. Now we are reconciled to understand one another... We built irreconcilable barriers between us: now we seek to build a society of reconciliation. We suffered a separateness that did not work: now we are reconciled to make togetherness work. We believed we alone held the truth: now we are reconciled in the knowledge that truth holds us...

“We do not pretend that we have already won or we are already perfect: now we are reconciled to press on together to the fullness which lies ahead. We are reconciled to the patience and persistence that make peace; to the fairness and transparency that make justice; to the forgiveness and restitution that make harmony; to the love and reconstruction which banish poverty and discrimination; to the experience of knowing one another that makes it possible to enjoy one another; to the spiritual strength of one God, who made us of one flesh and blood and who loves us.”