

31st Sunday (C)

- In the early 70s there was a book written by a theologian (Peter Fransen), on Grace, but the best part of the book was a parable at the beginning, meant as an introduction to enable a better understanding of this theological term – ‘grace’.
- The parable concerns a girl who is born into & grows up in a dysfunctional family.
- Her very conception was a mistake, her birth wasn’t awaited with joyful expectation & she grew up scorned, abused, unwanted & unloved.
- As soon as she could, she left home & no-one came looking for her.
- As she grew up, she did so in coarse surroundings, living the law of the jungle, biting in order not to be bitten, lashing out at others in crude, unmannered speech; she wore an embittered mouth & hard face; she had no respect for anyone because she had no respect for herself; she dressed gaudily & didn’t take care of herself.
- When she had any intimate relations, it was only for a few lustful moments – she used others as she herself was being used.
- Then there came into town a young man who grew up in a loving family – he was handsome, strong & self-assured without being arrogant; he met the girl & he saw through her crude exterior, seeing the beauty within.
- His heart went out to her, but she just laughed at him & mocked his genuinely caring & loving advances towards her.
- It took a long time, but eventually she began to trust him, seeing that he wasn’t out to use her & she slowly allowed herself to be loved.
- As she did, her old self began to die – the first sign of it being her first real smile, but it was a painful dying because she had come to rely on a certain attitude & hardness that got her through life & the walls of her former life were crumbling, & out of that painful dying came the birth of her true self.
- She began to see the beauty in a sunset, was filled with joy at the goodness of loving relationships, she began to dress with more care & self-respect; she had begun to see herself mirrored in the eyes of the young man who loved her for who she really was; who she could be – he loved her into life.
- A lovely story, but the question is – could there be anyone so self-effacing in love to change another person – all of us are more self-centred than we care to admit.
- But the point is that there was such a man who is powerful enough to transform people – who can bring to birth our true selves as a hardened old self dies.
- This is the point of today’s Gospel story of Zacchaeus.
- Zacchaeus was certainly an understandably despised man in his society.
- Tax collectors never anywhere enjoy popularity, but those who practised this profession in those days in Israel had a particularly bad reputation – they were not only working for the occupying power – the Romans – but they were also given the privilege on deciding how much each family had to pay – they demanded so much that they could keep for themselves the difference between the money they collected & the amount they had to turn over.
- Zacchaeus was small in stature, but not in self-centred ambition.
- He must have run his business very well because he became very wealthy.
- So, even though he knew he was despised, why should he change? He had power & wealth & he couldn’t do anything to win the support & respect of people anyway.
- They knew what he was like & **that** wouldn’t change, so why not make the most of what he’s got; BUT he was also kept that way by people who wouldn’t be prepared to see him any differently; wouldn’t have given him room to change.

- I suspect that most of us are like that – we don't change for the better simply because we decide that it's a good thing to do.
- We hold firmly to what we have & what we are like & the attitudes we have & the behaviour we've become used to because even though we may not like some of them & even though we may not even like ourselves for what we do, we're in a bind – we don't know how to change things in ourselves & the effort to do so anyway is not worth it.
- It is still more comfortable to remain the same than go through the hardship of moving beyond our comfort zone into the insecurity & pain of doing, thinking & being different from before, like the girl in the parable who had to die to the familiar habits, attitudes & behaviour in order to rise to a new way of life.
- We usually change when we're caught-out, when our cover is blown-apart & the way we've been is exposed to public scrutiny & we're forced to abandon past habits & behaviours & we've been publicly shamed, but even then, the change is not something we do freely.
- **Or** we change, simply because we can't go on living the way we have.
- But in the story of Zacchaeus, he is changed because of the loving acceptance of Jesus of him as he is & it is this love that makes Zacchaeus want to change & he does so not by simply making a declaration publicly that he will be different, but by his promise to make recompense to all he has cheated, over & above what would be fairly expected; Jesus loves him into a new way of living.
- So what does this say to us?
- I think firstly – do not expect people to change, even the ones we love, simply because we want them to change – even if that is the best for them.
- Maybe firstly something within us has to change if we want to effect change in another person, & anyway, we can't force people to change & if it seems that we've achieved it, it is likely to be short-lived.
- If we seek change in another, then we can only do so like the young man in the story & like Jesus in the Gospel, love them as they are into a new life that their true self may come to life.
- Secondly, the message of the Gospel calls us to be honest with ourselves & recognise the changes necessary in our own lives.
- Where in our own lives are we called by Christ to grow?
- What are things that we're called to die to so that new life may come?
- This is the power of the sacrament of Reconciliation which is celebrated regularly in our parish & which will be celebrated in a few weeks in Advent as a community.
- The power of this sacrament effects the power of God's forgiveness that loves us into a new way of living.
- Thirdly, I think the Gospel says something to us about hospitality.
- Offering hospitality is a profound social act.
- When we offer hospitality, we invite another into our world, into our lives & community; we shift our attention from our own cares & concerns to the needs & comfort of the other.
- Openness to relationships with others who are different, changes people's hearts.
- The hospitality that Jesus offers recreates the world from one of insider versus outsider to one of universal inclusivity – that's scary because people's views of others need to change & then, God forbid, hearts can change & people can join hands in friendship.
- How different the world would be!