31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2013

THEME: ZACCHAEUS – CALLED BY NAME

READINGS: Wisdom 11:22-12:1/ 2 Thess. 1:11-2:2/ Luke 19:1-10

By Very Rev. Fr. John Louis ([http://frlouis.com](http://frlouis.com/))

The main message of today is about God’s mercy and our repentance. However, because quite recently I spoke about this topic (*see the homily entitled*: ‘***Easy Access To Debt Cancellation***’) let us reflect on another aspect of the gospel reading: the fact that when Jesus saw Zacchaeus on the sycamore tree he called him by name.

The name ‘Zacchaeus’ means ‘pure’ or ‘righteous’ one. Yet Zacchaeus the chief tax collector did not lead a life that corresponded with the meaning of his name. Collecting taxes for the gentile and oppressive ‘colonial masters’ was seen as a sin of betrayal by fellow Jews; and amassing wealth by ‘over-taxing’ fellow Jews made them dislike tax collectors the more. So, in a way, when Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, He did so to forgive him and lead him back to his ***true identity***: to become a ‘righteous’ one.

***What is your/my name?***  To where is Jesus calling and leading us back to? My name is John, which means ‘God’s favour’. Therefore, Jesus is calling and leading me back to those favours of God I have lost through sin. What about you? ***What is the meaning of your name?***

Some African Christians, without making a distinction between biblical names or names of the saints (on the one hand) and European names that are not associated with any saints (on the other hand), have dropped their baptismal names (e.g. Francis, Cecilia, Peter, Mary), with the protest that these are names of former colonial masters. May I ask such Christians: do African Moslems drop their Islamic names?

The fact is that when we encounter God we gain a new personality; and sometimes in the Bible, this new identity is made evident by the giving of a new name: Abram become Abraham, Jacob became Israel, Simon was called Peter and Saul, Paul. Thus at baptism, when we became special children of God, we were given a new name to signify our new relationship with God. Why should we drop this name?

Instead of dropping our baptismal names, we should rather live up to what they signify: (a) our relationship with God, (b) the meaning of our names, and (c) the virtues and other good examples of the saints we have been named after. [*You can find this on Google*.]

Some have dropped an ***essential sign of their identification*** ***with Christ*** (namely their baptismal names) in reaction against ‘neo-colonization’, whereas everything else about them shows that they are actually still colonized: their hair styles (some African ladies), the suit they wear in the hot sun, their (imported) shoes – you name them. ***These are rather the non-essentials they should drop, and not their baptismal names!***

This is not to say that one cannot be baptized with African names like ‘Adom’ (which means grace), ‘Nutifafa’ (peace), etc. These names are Christian virtues or values. But names like Kojo, Adjoa, Kobina, Abena, etc. only identify the day of the week on which we were born; they do not identity us with Christ! The situation is even worse when some retain their local names that are associated with idols.

Beloved, as Zacchaeus was called, forgiven and made to live by the meaning of his name, so may we heed the call of Christ to enjoy God’s mercy; and ***may the harmony between our names and our lives be an effective testimony of our genuine relationship with Christ***. Amen!