

Franciscan Missionary Union
Toll free number: 1.888.372.6478
Website: www.fmunion.org

135 West 31st St
New York, NY 10001

February 2010

Dear Friend of the Missions,

February moves us along in the year. February 2 is the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. It is the day that the Church blesses candles and honors Jesus as the Light whom the darkness cannot overcome. February 3 is the Feast of St. Blaise. On this day the Church blesses throats. February 5 is First Friday and also the feast of the Japanese Martyrs. February 22 is the Feast of the Chair of Peter, a good day to pray for Pope Benedict XVI. Each February, the Church has a day set aside to remember those in religious life (Feb 7), those who are sick (Feb 11) and those who are married (Feb 14). Please join the Church in prayer for those groups. **Lent begins in this month:** Ash Wednesday is February 17. It is a day of strict fast and abstinence. Perhaps as you make some sacrifice, you can use the money you save to help feed people who have no food. Feb 16 is Presidents' Day. Many people will be traveling and taking winter break. Pray for them to return home safely. Be assured of our prayers for you and your intentions, especially that this Lent will be a time of personal renewal for you and your loved ones. **We all hope and pray that this Lent will be a fruitful time of preparation for Easter and true spiritual renewal. We are all so grateful for your support of the missions. You help our missionaries to do remarkable things.**

Lest Lent be a scary thing!

Fr. Russell Becker, O.F.M.

For many people Lent is a little terrifying. We set out on Ash Wednesday to take a really good long look at ourselves and try to see ourselves as we really are, not as we do when we are prepared to take a look and we come up with good excuses for our mistakes and learn to pass over or ignore our failures. It is amazing how we develop skills to see ourselves in a better light than others do. When I have to look in the mirror, I am ready to see someone thinner, someone with much more hair, and even much younger. Then every once and a while I happen to pass a mirror unprepared and I wonder who that really old, really heavy and really bald person is. Then I realize it is me! In a way Lent is seeing ourselves unprepared—without excuses and selective vision. God asks us to do this, so that we may actually grow closer to God in Lent and start afresh at Easter with the renewal of our baptismal commitment.

In the Eastern Church, one of the Sundays before Lent is the Sunday of Zacchaeus. This is the gospel for the day (Luke 19, 1-10). The account can be very helpful for us as we get closer to Lent. The Zacchaeus story is a great way for us to prepare for the discipline of Lent. It makes it a little easier to take that realistic look at ourselves because of what happens to Zacchaeus.

Who was Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus was a scoundrel! He was short, self-centered little man who betrayed his own people by becoming a tax collector for the Romans. Tax collectors would buy a franchise for a particular area and agree to pay a certain amount of money to the Romans. Then they would go about collecting money from people, usually with his own guards or maybe even with the help of Roman soldiers. Whatever he could get over and above what he contracted to pay was profit. You can presume he was vigorous in collecting. He was a bully and the people hated him. They probably laughed at him behind his back, but when people faced him and his 'helpers' they were had no choice but to pay up and not complain.

It might be fair to presume that all the money Zacchaeus had did not make him happy for very long. More than likely, the more he had, the more he wanted, and he was never satisfied. There was probably a deep longing for something, but, more than likely, he did not know what it was. Then he hears about Jesus. The reputation of Jesus must have spread. He did miraculous things, he healed people, spoke in ways that gave people new hope, and forgave people others would never forgive. Jesus was coming to where Zacchaeus was, where Zacchaeus thought he was the big person. As Jesus was approaching and perhaps speaking to the crowd, there must have been a fair amount of people who saw Zacchaeus hanging around and wondered by what right he would be coming to see Jesus. Some must have laughed when they realized he could not see easily because of his size and when he went up into the tree, people really must have been making fun of him, at least in their minds.

This must have been very difficult for Zacchaeus. He was curious and maybe hoping that seeing Jesus might help him, maybe even to be a better person. But all the people hated him, and certainly did not think that Jesus would have anything to do with him. Surely they

believed that if anyone did not deserve to see Jesus, it was Zacchaeus. But it seems he did not care, his curiosity got the best of him, and he did not even worry about people making fun of him up a tree.

Who was Jesus? Jesus was no scoundrel! He was the Promised One, the one all were waiting for, even someone like Zacchaeus. Jesus must have kept a great eye on the crowd, especially noticing people that others did not: many of the sick and the rejected. He also had a reputation for spending too much time with people who were considered sinners and misfits. Many times in the gospels the crowds were not happy with what he did and what he said, and especially the people with whom he associated.

Jesus walks up to the tree and invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus. There is a long list of people whose lives turned around after they spent time with Jesus. That is exactly what happened to Zacchaeus! His response to this acceptance by Jesus was a real change. As people murmured about Jesus eating with him, he got up and witnessed to the change. His response was not a conversion rooted in justice, but a conversion rooted in abundance. He would pay back much more than he extorted. Zacchaeus seemed to intuit that true meaning of God's love and seemed to understand the Good News of Easter much better than many of the closest collaborators of Jesus. Judas could never believe that he would be forgiven. Peter always seemed a little embarrassed by it. Zacchaeus boasted of the affect and effect of Jesus on his life.

The point for us? We are about to begin Lent again. Begin it remembering Zacchaeus. If the Lord can forgive someone as awful as he was, then you should not worry about whether the Lord will forgive us. As much as we know the Lord calls us to himself, at the same time he is always reaching out to us. What worked in the gospel will work for us. If we get to know the Lord better and accept his love, we too will know a new and glorious Easter. Wholeness is offered to us, just as surely as it was offered to Zacchaeus. Perhaps if we take that chance this year in Lent, we, too, will know a conversion rooted in abundance.

Let this Lent be different! This Lent try some different approaches to keeping Lent. Lent is a 40-day preparation for Easter which included self-examination, but also deepening our relationship with the Lord. Let the power of his love give you the strength to do the Lenten journey. Use Lent to prepare for the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Do it as late into Lent as possible. Try to be more selfless. Do not worry over you being forgiven as much trying to be more forgiving. Make sacrifices for the poor. There are a lot of people who need help. Try to be one of the ways God helps those in need. It might also be good to get involved with RCIA and people who are preparing for baptism at Easter. They will help the community to appreciate the dignity of baptism in case any have forgotten. Read more Scriptures and pray and reflect on them all through Lent. Lenten practices can be like New Year's resolutions—set aside way too soon. Be especially kind to those close to you. We do not journey alone. This journey with the memory of Zacchaeus in our hearts will not be difficult. It will be an experience of true joy in the Lord, Easter joy.

**O God, you know how fragile is our human nature
wounded as it is by our sin and failure.
Help your people to enter upon the lenten journey
strengthened by the power of your word,
so that we may be victorious over the temptations we face
and reach the paschal feast in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Reflection Questions

1. Here is the age-old question: what are you going to do for Lent?

2. Do you have the curiosity of Zacchaeus? Will you search out the Lord, no matter what people think? And welcome him into your life?

3. Will you rejoice or be scandalized when other sinners are forgiven?

4. The Lord is rich in mercy and kindness, can you embrace this way of the Lord?

Please remember Fr. Aubrey McNeil, O.F.M. (Home Missions), his birthday is February 16.

May God bless him and give him strength and energy in his ministry!

Please remember our present and former missionaries who are ill:

Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)
Fr. Ignatius McGeedy, O.F.M. (Brazil)
Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Home Missions)
Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)
Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Give them health, joy and length of days, O God!