

I can't see the Forest for the Trees!

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree...
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.
-Joyce Kilmer

More years ago than I would like to admit, I was walking around St. Joseph's Lake with Chris, a Notre Dame classmate. Surrounded by trees as we were, Chris looked at a tree that was particularly gnarled and said, "Trees are just grotesque weeds." Oh, my! Chris, wherever you are, this article is for you...

In the Midwest, we are surrounded by my classmate's "grotesque weeds". At this time of year, the once-leafy giants are bare and brittle. The wind makes their limbs and branches creak and groan, and it produces a death-rattle when it blows through twigs and whatever lonely, crisp leaves continue to deny their own mortality by clinging for dear life to the wooden skeleton which, in a gentler season, gave them birth. Against this stark background, we begin the Great Fast.

We began our preparation for the Great Fast back in February with Zacchaeus Sunday. In the Gospel for that day, we heard once again how that short man climbed a tree in order to see Jesus. Two expressions come to mind. On the one hand Zacchaeus was "up a tree": like a person chased up a tree by wolves, he was in a difficult situation, plagued as he was not only by his short stature, but also by his reputation as a sinful tax-collector. Then along comes Jesus, Whom many considered to be "out of His tree" – that is, crazy; do you remember how the family of Jesus came to rescue Him from a crowd, claiming that He was out of His mind? Yet this divine insanity which led Christ to love sinners – to love those who, like us, reject Him again and again – was precisely what attracted Zacchaeus to Jesus.

In the eyes of the "righteous" people, Zacchaeus was "up a tree" and Jesus was "out of His tree". But the "righteous" had a greater handicap than Zacchaeus: after all, Zacchaeus was able to overcome the vision problem caused by his size, whereas the "righteous" were unable to overcome the blindness caused by their stubbornly self-righteous rigidity. Unable – or rather unwilling – to recognize Jesus, they rejected the One Who is the Source of Life and their only hope, thus depriving themselves of the life which Jesus offered. In the final analysis, it seems that Jesus is not the One Who was "out of His tree"; the self-righteous who criticized both Jesus and Zacchaeus fit the definition much better.

All of this brings us to reflect upon another tree: the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" whose fruit Adam and Eve were enticed to eat. Eating this fruit made them realize that they were not only naked and vulnerable, but also sinful. Since then, we and all of humanity have been "up a tree" – pursued as we are by too many "wolves" to enumerate. Do we let ourselves be swallowed up by them, or do we – like Zacchaeus - seek not only immediate relief, but also a trustworthy refuge and a long-term solution? There is a reason why Zacchaeus is held up for our emulation as we begin our preparation for the Great Fast.

Of course, Christ is the solution for which we long. After the Great Fast, we will see Jesus “up a tree” – that is, on the cross. In embracing the cross for us, He embraces the human condition which He has chosen to share with us. In so doing, He takes our humanity and transforms it. We are more than what Adam and Eve found themselves to be: while a wolf may still see us as dinner, Jesus shows us we are God’s beloved; while we remain mortal earthly creatures, the Christ Who conquered death shows us that we are so much more; while we remain sinners, Jesus shows us that we are *capax Dei* – that is “capable of God”, destined to share the divine life of the Trinity . We can only recognize our true selves in Christ, and we can only reach our full potential by letting ourselves be conformed to Him, by letting our human lives be conformed to His Divine Life. The blessing of the Cross undoes the curse brought about through the tree of Eden.

The Great Fast is bookended by two trees – the sycamore of Zacchaeus, and the Cross of Christ. The grace of the Fast is available to those who are willing to scale those two trees. Only then can we be reborn to the vision which can only be seen by those who are “out of their tree” enough to follow Zacchaeus and Jesus “up a tree”. The Great Fast presents us with a choice: will the trees of our lives remain wintry and barren, or will they burgeon with the springtime of resurrected life?

-Fr. Jim, op