

31<sup>st</sup> Sunday (C)

30<sup>th</sup> October 2022

'Climb the tree! — glimpse something new!'

Wis 11: *[you] overlook men's sins so that they can repent.* Ps 144: *The Lord is kind and full of compassion.* 2Thess 1: *complete all that you have been doing, through faith.* Lk 19: 1–10: Zacchaeus's conversion and repentance.

Some of you — maybe most of you — have heard me or one of the students speak of the *Sycamore* video programme on the Catholic faith that we run here at Newman House on Wednesday evenings. Now you might well wonder, what on earth is it all about, and more particularly, just why is it called 'Sycamore'? Well, the answer to that question is manifest in today's Gospel passage. When Zacchaeus becomes intrigued and determined to find out a bit more about Jesus — at a safe distance! — what does he do, but climb a *sycamore* tree by the way that he expected Jesus to pass?

A few years ago I was on a Holy Land pilgrimage, and so was Fr Stephen Wang, my predecessor here at Newman House and the author of the *Sycamore* video course. After some days in Galilee, we drove down the Jordan Valley, and having visited and prayed at the baptismal site on the Jordan River, we came to Jericho,

reputedly the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, almost 10,000yrs old. Now, naturally enough, when we were in Jericho Fr Stephen was determined to see the sycamore. So we did — we stopped the coach to view the old sycamore which stands at a major intersection in Jericho city centre. Whether or not this particular tree, ancient though it is, is quite 2000yrs old and the very one that Zacchaeus climbed, is beside the point. This tree commemorates that life-changing encounter between Zacchaeus and Our Lord and it points to a key principle of evangelization.

Sometimes people just need to 'take a look,' from a safe distance at what Jesus is about. Zacchaeus had obviously already heard of Jesus, although Jericho wasn't a main place of Our Lord's ministry but would have been a regular stopping-off point for him on the safer route back and forth from Jerusalem to Galilee along the Jordan Valley. Whatever drew Zacchaeus to be attracted to see what kind of a man Jesus was — maybe it was his guilty conscience as an embezzler of others' money, and a desire

to find a source of real forgiveness for his wrongdoing — he is determined to take the opportunity to glimpse Jesus. What is important to see is that that real glimpse very quickly escalates into a full-scale conversion for Zacchaeus. Once Jesus sees that desire of Zacchaeus to see Him, Jesus asks to *stay* with Zacchaeus, who is taken aback by the Lord's request. His heart is quickly 'taken over' by a love for goodness. Letting Jesus see him, and then coming close and allowing the Lord into his house and his life, leads to an immediate repudiation of the misuse of his neighbour, and a strong desire for making full and generous reparation. His life is, in a matter of minutes, completely turned around, and from being trapped in a cycle of sin and exploitation, he was joyfully released into a vibrant new relationship with his compatriots, through his new relationship with Jesus.

Let's never underestimate the power of just bringing someone to glimpse Jesus. Whether that's bringing a non-Catholic or non-Christian friend to Sunday or weekday Mass; or coming with them to *Sycamore* on Wednesdays,

or to something else here in our Catholic life at Newman House, we should be active and open to providing real glimpses of Jesus to others.

In that regard, I think that maybe it's a great moment, in the middle of this first term of the year, to make an honest assessment of how we're making use of Newman House, your very own chaplaincy. How are you utilizing this fantastic opportunity of Newman House? It's a privileged thing to have such a Chaplaincy-centre building / CathSoc structure across the colleges / chaplains' availability — to have such a well-endowed facility as this! Don't take it for granted! So many Catholic university students across the country don't have anything like what we have here! So, I know that you're all busy with studies — I know, I did a physics degree, full-on days of lectures, supervisions and practical classes, followed by 4 yrs full-time research for a PhD. I know that it's important to give solid time to these once-in-a-lifetime university studies. But even so, you've also got a once-in-a-lifetime chance to grow in your faith!

So, now that you're a bit more settled in to the academic year, I'd like to re-iterate some of the opportunities available here at Newman House ... some of the opportunities you've got here to grow in faith, friendship, and ??? We have a 'golden rule' here at Newman House — perhaps a better term would be a 'golden suggestion' — namely that above and beyond your prayerful participation in Sunday Mass, and the fellowship that follows, tea & coffee & cake, (and lunch), we'd also hope and expect that you come here also at some other time(s) in the week: our 'golden suggestion' is that you aim at **1 weekday Mass per week** (maybe in your CathSocs, on campus, or maybe here at Newman House, Mon–Fri 5.30pm); and that you aim at **1 other Catholic weekday event per week**. This is because, if you're serious about your faith, the 1 hr/week of Sunday Mass just isn't enough. The Mass of Sundays and holydays (like All Saints' Day) is 'of obligation' (so to speak) — but you might better call it a 'starvation diet,' the bare minimum spiritual input for the week to survive. If we're really in love with Jesus Christ our Saviour, it

won't be enough; it simply won't *feel* enough! And we can train ourselves into desiring the Lord more, by starting initially just to give Him more. Some of you, I know, want to give Him *much* more — daily Mass, and participation in the max. that's on offer ... That's great! It's inspiring to me to see it, and it's a blessed gift on your part to our generous and loving Creator and Redeemer. But for those of you who are still wavering, unsure whether to give more to the Lord than just the Sunday Mass, I'd say: *go for it!* Give it a try, and you will not be disappointed. A life given over to God in the most generous way, by means of prayer, learning, charity, spiritual encouragement, spreading the Gospel — this is a blessed life, and one that will lead to much fulfilment.

So, start by just coming by at extra times, as this chapel is open to you day after day: 9am to 8pm Monday to Friday there's a Receptionist on the front door. They are there *for you* — they're there, on duty precisely to let you come in! It's your chaplaincy, your chapel, so come by often, even if you've only 5 or 10 mins *en route* along Gower St to come in for peace and prayer. Come to an extra Mass in the week — especially if your

college CathSoc organises a campus Mass (some do so weekly), or otherwise here, 5.30pm daily, to be present with Jesus at the most perfect prayer given us, His holy Sacrifice. I'm sure that we could easily up the numbers at weekday Mass, 25–30 should be possible, and with the Masses of November offered for your departed loved ones, even more reason to be here at Mass, to pray for them. Especially beautiful is also our Tuesday quiet prayer of Adoration, from after Mass at 6pm until the rite of Benediction at 9pm: a special time to come and be here at prayer.

Our newsletter, and our Newman House FB page (please 'like' it and follow it!) constantly lists all the week's programme — talks and events every night; choose which one you are going to come to ... definitely think of coming to at least 1, as I said. And on the horizon, too, mid-November is a 'Faith & Science' event with *Radio Maria England*, and then our student weekend retreat at an Abbey in rural Sussex. Don't let it all go by — this is your one big chance, whilst at university, to have a chaplaincy dedicated to you, and your growth in faith and Catholic friendship. ... which brings me back to *Sycamore*, named after that tree of Zacchaeus's spontaneous climb in Jericho. Wednesdays (7pm) is our *Sycamore* evening, a chance for you to accompany someone here to help them glimpse Jesus. The

course is easily accessible, friendly (free dinner!) and with non-specialist discussion questions, to allow someone of any background — non-Catholic, non-Christian — to get a chance to experience the faith, a bit like Zacchaeus, from a distance of their own choosing. But we know that Zacchaeus was immediately enthralled by Jesus, who loved him and wanted to bring him closer. It is our special privilege and God-given task to bring others to Jesus, so they can glimpse the love & meaning that He gives. *Sycamore* is a great way of doing that, so please think of coming — on your own, or preferably with a friend!

Let's end by hearing again those encouraging words of St Paul (1 Thess 1:11–12) which we heard earlier ...

*To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

May you indeed “fulfil every resolve for good” and give really generously of your time and talent whilst here at university, “for the greater glory of God.”