

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

(The names that we are given by our moms and dads give us our identity as persons and provide meaning for our lives. Let us pray for the grace to be true to the name we have been given.)

When I was born in April of the year 1947 my parents had different ideas about what my name should be. My dad wanted to name me Matthew and my mom wanted to name me Stephen. Both actually gave in to the other. My mom was in the hospital room filling out little notification cards announcing the birth of their third child, a son. Named Matthew, she wrote. But when my dad came into her room he said that he agreed with her and that my name should be Stephen and not Matthew.

It was not until many years later that I actually got interested enough to look up what my name means and what the name Matthew means. Matthew means Gift of God. Stephen means Crowned One, from the Greek Stephanos, meaning "wreath, crown, honor, reward", literally Stephanos means that "that which surrounds or encompasses". In other words to be Stephanos or Stephen is to wear the crown, to rule or govern, to lead and guide. For me I am most true to my name when I act as a true shepherd for my people, leading and guiding them as their pastor.

Names are fascinating and so very important. There is a unique name in the gospel today. There was this Jewish man in the city of Jericho whose name was Zaccheus. In a short while I will tell you what his name actually meant. For now, he was a wealthy man and he was a short man. We also know that he was the chief tax collector in that city and therefore most people really hated him. They believed he was doing the Roman's dirty work and making money off of it for himself. And he did do that and he did make a lot of money. So even though he was wealthy he was despised by most people.

Now in the story Zaccheus hears that Jesus is coming to Jericho and he has heard about this Jesus and he is very curious about him. But because he is so short he checks out the path along which Jesus and the crowds will pass. Zaccheus runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree which in Israel was also a fig tree. The trunk Grows parallel to the ground at first and so it is very easy to climb up and when he did that he was able to see Jesus pass by directly underneath him. What Zaccheus doesn't realize is that Jesus is going to stop right under that tree and call him down and announce to Zaccheus that he, Jesus, wants to stay in Zaccheus' home that day. Zaccheus is overjoyed. He can't believe it. He thought that he was the last person Jesus would ever want to eat with and then suddenly the last becomes first. But Jesus does want to enter our homes and eat with us just he invites us to enter here and be fed at his table, the altar of sacrifice.

This whole experience, this great unexpected surprise has an amazing effect on Zaccheus. It touches his heart. It changes his heart. Jesus has changed his heart. How do we know this? Because up until that time Zaccheus has been making a lot of money by gouging and extorting money from ordinary Jewish people. Now suddenly he renounces half of all he owns and pledges to pay back four times over anyone he has defrauded. When you go from stealing money and hoarding money to giving away money and paying damages for wrongs done, then you are a different person. A changed man. His heart had been converted and converted by Jesus of Nazareth.

The name Zaccheus means Righteous One. Before he met Jesus he was anything but a righteous person. He was an extortioner, a person who defrauded people out of their money. Now he has become a

restorer and a source of generous giving. Truly righteous. Which is what his name means. Jesus restores to Zaccheus his real identity and his true identity. He has been remade in the image and likeness of his God in and through the grace of Jesus. It is the presence and mercy of Jesus that accomplishes this. That is what Jesus can do. That is what Jesus does do when we believe in Him and when we open ourselves to Him. Jesus makes us the person God has always wanted us to be, the name and identity that was given to us by God himself in and through the choices and decisions of our parents.

The sycamore tree is a fig tree and the fig tree has long been the symbol for the true People of Israel. So when Jesus calls Zaccheus down from the tree he is actually plucking the fruit of the tree of Israel and making that fruit good and nourishing and sweet. Jesus is restoring to Zaccheus what he had lost by making bad decisions. What Jesus did for Zaccheus He does for us too. But only if we open ourselves to Him and put aside our former ways of doing things and our former ways of thinking about things.

That all of this happened in Jericho is no surprise either. The name Jericho is an Arabic word meaning: city of the moon. The moon, as we know, has no light of its own but it can shine with great brilliance even though its light comes entirely from the sun, our star. With Zaccheus he has no light of his own but with Jesus who is the light of the world, Zaccheus allows that light to shine on him, in him and then out from with him. Then Zaccheus shines in a way now that he never did before. It is not his own light but the light of Jesus Christ that he has welcomed within himself and now shines forth from within him. And for the first time in his life, Zaccheus has become a happy man. He has finally become himself. He has finally become a righteous man full of integrity and embarking on the life the Lord has always wanted for him. The secret for you and me is to believe that same Jesus Christ and that same grace are available to you and me in this moment in 2022.

May He bless us and give us His peace.