

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 C

We confess Jesus is our Savior, sent for our salvation, to seek and save what was lost. But just what do we mean by that term, salvation? In Scripture, salvation means a whole family of related things. You can read Psalm 107 to get some flavor of this, with four different examples of being saved by God: those lost in the desert find their way to safety; those in prison are set free; those who are sick are cured; those who are caught by storm on the sea come to calm waters. Each of these implies some miraculous intervention by God, reaching into the lives of those in danger to do for them what no human power could do.

But there is one striking difference in this encounter of Jesus with Z – there is no divine miracle as in so many other episodes. No loaves or fish are multiplied. No eyes are given sight, no limbs healed, no hearing restored, no leprosy cured, no body returned to life. What saves Z is compassion and kindness, as he is seen, called by name by Jesus, and restored to his own sense of dignity and worth as a child of God.

Shift gears with me for a moment. Picture a young girl born in southern Sudan some time in the late 1860s. At age 7 she was kidnapped from a peaceful home and sold into slavery. With twisted humor, her captors gave her the nickname Bakhita, which means *fortunate*. She was beaten harshly and bore 114 scars throughout her life. She was resold a dozen times before she was 12, just an object, not even knowing her own birthday. Finally she came to the household of the Italian consul in Khartoum. There, she found some kindness. Through her task to babysit a child, she met an order of nuns, the Canossian Sisters, and then first heard about Jesus, her Savior. That kindness of those who finally saw her as a person, not a thing, changed her life. Baptized in 1890, she took the name Josephine. Asked once what she would do if she met those who sold her as a slave, she said: “I would forgive them, and thank them, because through that evil I met Jesus Christ.”

Pope Benedict recounted her story as an example of *the power of redeeming hope*. St. Josephine Bakhita came to know that her human masters also had a Master they would meet and have to answer to some day, and that Jesus, this true Master, *knew her, loved her, and waited for her*. Her scars remained; her painful past was not erased; the years she lost could not be given back. But she now knew that she mattered. She was loved by God, and no human power could ever take that away.

“The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” Separated by over 18 centuries, and in different ways, both Zacchaeus and Josephine Bakhita were lost and found. What happened in their lives was not a miracle beyond human explanation, but the *kindness and compassion of being called, loved, valued*. I think Luke records the story of Z to show us that we can share in the redeeming work of Jesus, not by doing some great or miraculous thing, but by treating those we meet and those in need with respect, dignity, and the kind of reverence we would hope to show Jesus Himself. After all, he tells us: “Whatever you do for the least, you do for me.” *That will be important to remember in the voting booth.*

Whatever seems gone from our lives – our self-esteem, our compassion, our trust, our hope – Jesus Christ our Redeemer still comes, today, to seek and to save what was lost. We are called to share in that saving work of the Lord by even small acts of kindness, done for love of Him.