

## Oh when the Saints go marchin' in . . .

Clifford Pyncheon (in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*) had just been released from prison for a crime he did not commit. He had entered as a young man. He now returned to his sister Hepzibah's home - gray, hardly able to put one foot before the other. To his young cousin Phoebe the expression on his countenance . . . *seemed to waver and glimmer, . . . like a flame . . . among half-extinguished embers*. When introduced to Phoebe he could not recall who she was. All he wanted to do now was confine himself to an upstairs room and fade away.

But ever so lightly the musical airs sung by Phoebe from downstairs would transfigure his face with pleasure. He became less despondent. There was something so real about her, he began to recover his trust - within the walls of Hepzibah's house. As for the world outside, he could only view it with dismay from an arched upstairs window.

Then one day the banners, drums, fifes and cymbals of a parade swept past the house, a *mighty river of life, massive in its tide . . . calling to the kindred depth within him*. He shuddered; he grew pale, he threw an appealing look at Hepzibah and Phoebe, who were with him at the window. And then, *with tremulous limbs, he started up, set his foot on the window sill, and, in an instant more, would have been on the unguarded balcony. . . . Had Clifford attained the balcony, he would probably have leaped into the street; but whether impelled by the species of terror, that sometimes urges its victim over the very precipice he shrinks from, or by a natural magnetism, tending towards the great centre of humanity - it were not easy to decide*. Phoebe and Hepzibah had to restrain him. His sister cried out, *Clifford, Clifford, are you crazy?* to which Clifford replied, *I hardly know, Hepzibah, - but had I taken that plunge, and survived it, methinks it would have made me another man!*

That's precisely what Clifford needed to do - lay aside the bitterness and self pity that kept him still spiritually a prisoner despite his physical release and join that parade, which to my mind is nothing less than a metaphor of that grand parade which in our traditions began with God's call to Abraham, picked up momentum in our Hebrew scriptures until in today's Gospel (and in our liturgy) emerges with quickening pace led by Jesus himself through the streets of Jericho - where we come across another fellow named Zacchaeus, who doesn't want to be left behind.

Zacchaeus was also a person who had chosen to isolate himself from people around him - to pursue his own self-interest at their expense. The price he had to pay was loneliness, the loss of his humanity. And now here comes this parade with Christ as its drum major! He had to become a part of it. But how? He was so stunted! Nevertheless he knew a lot about upward mobility! So, he climbed a tree [which my son Adam so often did as a boy]. He diverted the parade right into his domicile, where he demonstrated a new found wholesomeness four times over.

That parade remains accessible to you every day if you have the depth of being to sense it. It may take a leap of faith but – you could soon be joining in that chorus: *Oh Lord, I want to be in that number, when the Saints go marchin' in . . .*

**Geoff Wood**