We all struggle to love certain people – and these can generally be grouped into two categories: people who are in our lives in a more or less stable way, such as difficult family members; or random people we encounter along life’s journey. We would have probably found it quite difficult to love Zacchaeus, who was a tax collector and so was corrupt. He had gotten very wealthy, but his riches were ill-gotten. We can only imagine the loathing and negative responses of the people in his district when he knocked on their doors to collect the revenue.

Our Lord did not have trouble loving Zacchaeus. In fact, he loved him quite readily. In fact, there is no one whom God does not love. Though sometimes we may find our fellow humans even to be repulsive, and perhaps they us, yet that is never the case in our relationship with God. Moreover, when we find someone unlovable, it is often a gut reaction: we, at least initially, have little control over it. But the Lord has no constraints on his love; as the first reading said, he has “mercy on all, because [he] can do all things”.

Yes, love is his gut reaction when he sees us; if we may say so, he can’t help himself. The first reading spoke in this vein, saying of God, “you love all things that are and loathe nothing you have made”. If we have the breath of life, then we “are” – we exist. That means he loves us. No matter what. Why I am going on and on about this? Because a good number of people struggle to believe it. And there is also confusion about God’s love among some, who think that it always implies approval.

Christ saw Zacchaeus and called out to him in love. But that did not mean that he approved of his lifestyle. We see that Zacchaeus sensed this immediately, for no sooner than he had come down from the tree and run to meet Jesus, he also started listing the reparations he would make for his many sins. Love, in human terms, involves desiring and seeking what is good for another. In God’s terms, it is accompanied by his saving grace; not only does the Lord desire what is good for us – he makes us good. He transforms us.

The old saying is, “Love the sinner, hate the sin”. That’s God’s approach to us. He never approves of evil. He wants only the good and always offers the grace to pursue it. The Christian life is hard and living it fully and consistently is only possible with grace. We have a supernatural calling; we need divine help to get there. St. Ambrose said, “without the assistance of grace, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing”! Do we respond to God’s love and grace with a well-ordered self-love – by trying to root out what we know displeases him?

Yes, God’s love for us must lead us to love ourselves the same way. “Love the sinner, hate the sin”. Though we struggle, we need not have self-loathing. Though we fail, we need to not have self-hatred. But we do need to keep trying. We make good resolutions. We calculate what we must do to keep them. And when we fail, we start again. What a wonderful gift the sacrament of confession is in this regard. In confession, the Lord, in the words of our psalm, “lifts up all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down”.

After Zacchaeus met Christ, his life had to change. So must it be for us, also, who have indeed met him. In fact, in the Holy Eucharist God’s incredible love for us is so wonderfully revealed. There he gives himself to us entirely. There he offers every grace we could ever need – and when we receive him worthily, he continually enlarges our capacity to benefit from those graces. We do find it difficult to love people – and sometimes we feel like we can’t help it. God can’t help but love us – and he wants to, and will, transform us besides.