



## Remembering Oscar Romero

**Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year B, Ordinary 22

Song of Sol 2:8-13, Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

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I was going to begin today by making the offhand comment that I happened to be flicking through the Anglican calendar of saints earlier this week, only to realise that such a statement makes me sound very out of touch with reality. Reading the calendar of saints is not something I often do. As it happens I had a vague thought about today being father's day and was hoping to link that thought to some part of the Christian tradition. I completely failed to do that. My apologies to father's day...maybe next year.

Anyway, while doing this I happened to notice that one of the names I expected to find in the Anglican saints calendar was actually missing. While there have been numerous books written about Oscar Romero, he has not made it into our calendar of saints. At least not yet.

Oscar Romero was a Roman Catholic priest first ordained in the 1940's who served in his homeland of Al Salvador, where he eventually became bishop and then Archbishop. During his career many priests in this part of the world were developing the ideas that came to be known as liberation theology. Their reading of scripture led them to believe that when it came to social structures Jesus clearly stood on the side of the poor and was an advocate for the worst off in society. A well-known phrase often used to characterise liberation theology is that Jesus had a "preferential option for the poor". The literature typically speaks of the Jesus who stood in solidarity with the poor; an expression that is slightly easier to interpret.

The idea that Jesus was a liberator of the poor has been supported by many well-known Gospel passages, such as the feeding of the five thousand and the beatitudes in which Jesus states, "Blessed are the poor." But the scriptural evidence runs much deeper and even includes readings like our gospel passage this morning.

There are lots of rules that dictate how our society works. Some are unwritten rules like expressions of politeness such as holding a door for someone else, or saying please and thank you. Other rules are enshrined in our laws. For the most part these different rules serve us quite well. They are the oil that allow the machinery of society to keep running smoothly. The problem comes when we simply follow these rules in an unreflective way, forgetting to interrogate whether or not these rules actually serve all of us.

When Jesus found himself debating with the Pharisee's about the merits of washing before eating, Jesus took the opportunity to move beyond polite convention into a deeper discussion of what was being expressed through actions such as ritual washing. As we know, washing your hands before a meal is good basic hygiene. But in the first century the ritual of washing had come to symbolise spiritual purity, and being spiritually pure determined who had more of a say in how the community functioned. The argument being made by the Pharisees was that by not washing appropriately the disciples were showing themselves to be unholy, unrighteous people. More than that, by assigning such a status to the disciples the Pharisees were seeking to exclude the disciples from participating in the life of the Jewish community. It was an attack on the credibility of the leaders of the Jesus movement.

Jesus took exception to the empty piety of the Pharisees. What he suggests is that while the Pharisees make a grand show of being seen to do the right thing at the right time, their motivation was self-serving. The Pharisees loved to wax lyrical about how the Jewish community could be better, but their preoccupation with purity had become a new form of exclusion and oppression. For Jesus showing genuine love for others was far more important than appearing to be a good person, appearing to say or do the right things. Jesus wanted a community based upon the principle of loving each other. This is not a vague statement. Jesus wanted us to prioritise the dignity and well-being of those around us. And these priorities can only be met through meaningful action, not through societal rules which favour some and dehumanise others. This was not a thought exercise. Jesus wanted people to question and then act to change the inequality of society.

There is a phrase that gets thrown around these days which is often taken for granted. The phrase is, perception is reality. Now that might be true from a marketing perspective, but actually I would argue that reality is reality. This is very much the argument that Jesus is making. While the Pharisees worked hard to curate how they were perceived by others, they were ultimately misrepresenting themselves. The disciples however were living God's commandment to love their neighbours, with no care as to what others thought of them.

This touches on some of the thinking that shaped liberation theology. Liberation theology arose in countries that were typically governed by military regimes, where those who were part of the regime held a disproportionate amount of wealth and power. It was in this climate that liberation theologians dared to ask where Jesus would place himself. While they clearly understood that Jesus loved all, even those who were powerful, Jesus would have challenged such structures and championed the cause of those who were suffering under oppressive dictatorships. And when we think about that, their conclusion is not actually that surprising given that Jesus also lived under a military dictatorship.

When Oscar Romero became Archbishop of El Salvador in 1977, liberation theologians were disappointed with his selection. Romero was regarded as something of a conservative, a man who was unlikely to speak out against an unjust society. They believed that his track record did not demonstrate a commitment to the plight of the poor.

Less than a month later something happened which changed that. Another priest who was a close friend of Romero's, who was working with some of the poorest people in El Salvador, was assassinated. This had a profound effect on Romero. He would later say that upon looking at the body of his friend he thought, "If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path."

From that point on Romero became outspoken on issues of poverty, social injustice and the many human rights violations taking place in his country. He suggested to soldiers that as Christians they could not stand with a government that was causing harm to so many people. This was

likely to have been the step too far. In 1980 only three years after becoming archbishop Romero was shot and killed while presiding at the Eucharist.

What Romero reminds us of, is that while we often think we can separate our religion from our politics, the truth is that they exist in relationship with each other. In the last three years of his life Romero discovered that his belief in Christ compelled him to act in a political way. Jesus was critical of the political system of his time and sought to transform it in such a way that it better reflected the principle of loving our neighbour. As followers of Christ we too have a responsibility to transform unjust structures, to challenge oppression and systems that disproportionately reward some at the expense of others. It took Romero a lifetime to find that courage to do that.

There is a prayer by Michael Leunig that is probably my favourite piece of his. Like many things it is open to interpretation. For me, it is in part, a Christian prayer about politics.

God help us to change.

To change ourselves and to change our world.

To know the need for it.

To deal with the pain of it.

To feel the joy of it.

To undertake the journey without understanding the destination. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Leunig, *A Prayer Tree*