

14.10.18 Trinity 20:

Job 23 1-9, 16, 17: Ps 22 1-15: Heb 4 12-16: Mark 10 17-31

This Sunday (14.10.18) **Archbishop Oscar Romero** is being canonised (made into a saint) by Pope Francis. The ceremony takes place in St Peter's square, Rome. To mark the event, Kevin has arranged Salvadorian folk hymns on organ and piano before and after our service. We don't often talk about saints in the Anglican tradition, but I thought it would be good to think about Oscar Romero and commemorate his life.

Our Gospel passage from Mark asks the question, 'What must I do, to inherit eternal life?' Of course, at one level, the answer is simple; salvation is a gift of grace, which does not need earning. But in his response, Jesus implies that those with faith know that the things of the world will count for less than our love for God. Saints are modern-day superheroes in this regard because their faith is such that they are prepared to give everything away, sometimes even their own lives. Saints are inspiring because their lives point to a faithful service that most of us would struggle to achieve.

The medieval church calendar had many saints and churches overflowed with bits of saints' bones, teeth, blood, and so on, that people believed had healing powers. Having a good saint's relic in your church was a crowd-puller and brought lots of donations from eager devotees. Unfortunately, this led to some corrupt practices, including churches stealing each other's relics!

From the Tudor period, the reformation of the church swept many saint's feast days into a catch-all, 'All Saints Day'. This 'buy one saint, get several free' celebration, gave saints a toe-hold in the church, provided they didn't get above themselves or take away from the Bible as the main source of the church's authority. There are some quite odd saints in the modern-day Anglican church calendar, including some who are decidedly unholy, such as King Charles the First, of England, who annoyed enough people with his abuse of power to get his head chopped off!

Archbishop Romero on the other hand, is very different kind of person. Romero never flinched from preaching the Gospel to rich or poor, the powerful, or the powerless. Politicians and people in power in El Salvador hated Romero, because he preached against social injustice. He spoke out about the attacks, torture and arrests of citizens, including clergy and lay members of the Roman Catholic Church who were killed in the cause of serving the poor. Educational and church institutes, even Romero's radio station, were attacked, raided and bombed by the authorities, who wanted to silence Romero, and prevent people's work amongst the poor.

Romero had a gift for communicating and villagers or townspeople alike, all around El Salvador, tuned in on Sundays to listen to his broadcasts on the church radio station YSAX. Romero preached a gospel of hope and social justice. Romero called Mary 'a prophetic messenger of Christ' because her prayer, the Magnificat remembered the poor and the hungry' (15 July 1979). He spoke directly to people, from the heart. He once said: '*What an honour to think that all of you before me are Christ! Even the humblest peasant, maybe pondering there next to a radio, you are Christ!*' (13 January 1980). And, '*Christ is the homily that keeps explaining to us that God is love... Christ is God's homily preaching to you*' (27.10.80). (<https://www.catholicireland.net/oscar-romero-the-preacher/> accessed 12.10.18)

Week after week, Romero also listed the names of the disappeared, the tortured, and the murdered and wrote about them, in the diocesan newspaper *Orientación*. Romero's actions alienated the powerful, and even some in the conservative hierarchy of bishops, who did nothing to speak out against the corruption, exploitation and oppression of the poor. Romero's message of 'speaking truth to power' gained him many enemies. Finally, on 23rd March 1980, in the chapel of the Hospital de la Divina Providencia (Hospital of Divine Providence, a hospital for cancer and the terminally ill) some people thought he'd gone too far. Romero preached a sermon telling soldiers that as Christians, they had a higher duty to God and should not follow orders that violated people's human rights.

The next day, the 24th March, Romero celebrated mass in the same hospital chapel. As he finished his sermon, gunmen burst into the chapel and shot him dead. Romero was buried at the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador. Even during his funeral, smoke bombs were thrown, and shots fired deliberately into the assembled crowd, killing between 30-50 people. At the time, no one was charged with his murder and it was many years before a UN Truth Commission accused Roberto D'Aubuisson (the founder of the governing party in El Salvador, after the civil war) but he was never brought to justice.

So now, nearly forty years later, the martyred Archbishop Romero will become the saint from El Salvador, who is canonised by the pope from Argentina. Romero's statue already stands above the West Door of Westminster Abbey to commemorate his martyrdom. His bravery and determination to preach the Gospel in the face of terrible danger from corrupt authorities is an inspiration to us all.

What did Romero do, 'to inherit eternal life'? He followed his faith and continued to proclaim the Gospel, where ever it took him, even at the cost of his own life. So we give thanks for Archbishop Romero, for his faith, his life and the inspiration he gives to all of us, today.

Amen