

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 4th February 2024, Epiphany 5

Readings: **Isaiah 40:21-31**

1Corinthians 9:16-23

Psalms 147:1-11

Mark 1:29-39

Last month, while travelling in Guatemala, I found myself six hours bus ride away from San Salvador. Unfortunately, my journey at the time led elsewhere but that proximity felt significant because Archbishop Oscar Romero is buried in the Catholic Cathedral of San Salvador and he is a contemporary saint.

When Oscar Romero was first elected Archbishop in 1977, it was thought that he was a conservative academic who would not upset the status quo of Salvadoran society because he didn't know what was happening in country. At the time the Catholic bishops of El Salvador blessed the National Guard at the beginning of each year, and the National Guard brutally suppressed any challenge to the ruling elite.

There were gross inequalities within El Salvador in which the wealth of the country was controlled by a small group, supported by the US government... while the great majority of the population lived in poverty. If workers asked for better working conditions or pay, the leaders would be imprisoned, tortured, and then released. If they continued to advocate for change... then their broken bodies would be found on rubbish dumps as a lesson for others. Many Catholic priests also experienced persecution because of their support for the poor, and their advocacy for those who were imprisoned.

In God's grace Oscar Romero had a close friend who was a parish priest called Rutilio Grande. Father Rutilio worked with the poor and was keen for his friend Oscar to understand the plight of the majority in El Salvador. He took him to visit the families of those who had lost loved ones, and those who were imprisoned unjustly. Through these visits Archbishop Romero was convicted that he had to challenge the persecutors – and these included the leaders of Government, business, and the National Guard.

Using the technologies available to him he wrote letters – both public and private; his sermons were played on the radio throughout El Salvador; and the poor majority grew to love him. Their Archbishop visited them and understood their plight; their Archbishop explained the Gospel demand for justice and mercy, and he gave them hope; their Archbishop courageously spoke truth to power... demanding that things change.

From his sermons and reflections there are many powerful pieces of writing which gave voice to compassion and uncompromising logic, deeply grounded in the Scriptures. Sometimes I think his writing reads like poetry for he affirmed that, *'Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent*

*result of violent repression. **Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.** Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty.'*

Like many who speak prophetically, Archbishop Romero's words and actions were not welcomed by the leaders of his Government, and he was assassinated while celebrating communion in a hospital chapel in March 1980. However, the decision to kill Archbishop Romero seemed to be one step too far for many and significant economic pressures followed which helped to bring about political and social reform. These were formalised in the Chapultepec Peace accords of 1992, twelve years after Romero's death.

Imagine my joy when I found in a book shop a copy of Archbishop Romero's diary, simply titled, 'A Shepherd's Diary'. It was wrapped in plastic so I could not open it to preview. But, I did not have to look, I just wanted more insight into the life of this great man of faith who had not ducked the tough stuff of episcopal leadership, and who had written so powerfully. I anticipated pages of thought-provoking insight, with poems written in the margins!

However, what I found when I opened the book was that Archbishop Romero had an extraordinarily busy diary! There were no particular insights, and no poems in the margins! There was just evidence of a man who was disciplined in prayer and was busy with meetings and services from early in the morning to late in the evening... seven days a week.

The Gospel from Mark this week suggests that the life of Jesus was similarly busy... Jesus went to the house of Simon's mother in law and cured her fever. Then later that evening, Mark suggests, *'the whole city came to Simon's house, and they brought all who were sick, or who had demons.'* I reckon it would have been a late night, and that the work of listening to each person and healing them would have been physically, emotionally, and spiritually demanding. Jesus could have justifiably slept in the next day – because, who knows what time he went to bed! But, that's not what happened: verse thirty five tells us that *'early in the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.'*

He didn't tell the disciples where he was going – this wasn't a time to demonstrate how holy he was – or a teaching moment where he explained how to pray... he simply went and prayed. Clearly, he drew physical, emotional, and spiritual strength from that time of prayer – because he subsequently travelled *throughout Galilee healing and casting out demons*.

The potential that prayer has to recharge and renew physical, emotional and spiritual energy is not an insight found only in the Gospels. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote these beautiful words long before the Gospels were written: *'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the*

faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but, those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' (Isaiah 40:28-31)

Let me quote some of that again: *'(God) gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless... they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.'* Clearly, Jesus knew this and gave priority to prayer in the midst of his busyness. Clearly, Archbishop Romero knew this and gave priority to prayer in the midst of his hectic days. So, what about you and me? What priority do we give to prayer in the midst of our own busy living?

A qualifying phrase in these verses from Isaiah is important, *'...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength...'* I think so often in prayer we bring our own agenda, hopefully preceded by lots of thanksgiving! In intercessory prayer there's a lot to name – from individual people who are sick, to the ongoing need for peace in Ukraine and Gaza. However, *'Waiting on the Lord'* has a different focus. It's almost the prayer of Samuel – *'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!'* (1Samuel 3:10).

In quietness we wait – and we listen – and we breathe - and we're available to God's Spirit – and in God's grace through this we are strengthened, guided, and renewed.

It can be helpful to have a particular place to go to when you pray at home. It might be a designated chair, desk, or room. You might light a candle to remind you of the presence of Christ, read a Bible passage, or listen to a song to help you settle, and focus. You may do all or some of these things already? But, if you don't I encourage you to give them a go and find what is helpful! Make a time, define a space, and meet God in prayer. I often make a mug of tea to drink during that time, in much the same way that I would do if I was to sit down and spend time with a friend.

Let me close with prayer now...

Holy God we give thanks for each breath and heartbeat that makes our lives possible, and for your love. We give thanks that in prayer we can meet with you, share what's on our mind... and be guided by your Spirit. Please renew within us a longing to regularly meet with you in times of prayer this year, so that we can be our best selves, and through this be a blessing in the lives of others. We pray in the name of the one who said, *'Follow me!'* Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen