

Sermon: In the Face of Christ

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Feb. 11, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the historical centre of San Salvador, the capital city of El Salvador, stands a magnificent cathedral, the Metropolitana. Built in the 1950s, the Metropolitana combines Baroque and eclectic styles of architecture. It is the principal cathedral of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador, and the seat of the Archbishop of that city.

In front of this cathedral stands a monument, a high column with a globe resting on top representing the earth. On August 6 of every year, the city declares a public holiday, a festival of the Transfiguration of the Divine Saviour of the World. The highlight of this festival occurs when the top of the globe opens, and a statue of Jesus slowly rises up amidst the gathered and cheering crowd. It is a popular festival celebrating the transfiguration of Jesus, but the popularity of this site is no less attributed to the tomb, the final resting place of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Brother and sisters in Christ, today is the Transfiguration Sunday. A Sunday dedicated to the story recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew 17, Luke 9, and passage today of Mark 9. It is a familiar story describing the event when Jesus is transfigured, and becomes radiant in glory upon an unnamed mountaintop. His clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. He was flanked by what would appear to be Moses and Elijah. This incredible scene was witnessed by three disciples, Peter, James and John, the so-called favourites.

Completely baffled by what they saw, Peter, always the out spoken one, speaking without thinking, said to Jesus, "*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*" I love this explanation offers by the author of Mark, that "*He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.*"

The Lectionary reading today takes us also to 2 Corinthians 4, where the Apostle Paul offers his wise counsel to the congregation gathered in the city of Corin, instructing them to hold fast to "*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*". For Paul the glory of God is seen most clearly in the face of Christ, no doubt alluding to the event of the

Transfiguration. But what does it mean to say 'we see the glory of God in the face of Christ'? More importantly, how does that impact our lives? I think the story of the Oscar Romero in El Salvador offers us some clues.

El Salvador has historically been characterized by extreme socioeconomic inequality, between the impoverished majority and a small (about 2% of the population) but powerful land-owning elites. During the 1970s, its political class, backed by the elites, was stealing the presidential election through massive electoral fraud. In response, left-leaning opposition parties began to form, and began to conduct small-scale guerrilla operations in the countryside.

This growth of left-wing insurgency was further aided by the Cuban regime under Fidel Castro, as well as the Soviet Union, all taking place in the backdrop of rising food prices, decreasing agricultural output, and the 1973 oil crisis. Protests were sustained and wide spread, retaliations from the government backed security forces were often brutal and sometimes murderous. In the midst of mounting tensions and general instability, the 1979 military coup d'état kick-started what would be know as the Salvadoran Civil War for the next fourteen years.

It was during this time, Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, began to speak out against poverty, social injustice, torture and assassinations. Romero was actually known to be a conservative, not as a progressive. His appointment as archbishop in 1977 was quite welcomed by the government, and criticized by progressive priests fearing his conservative reputation would negatively affect liberation theology's commitment to the poor.

However, seeing his country descending into civil war, with military repression and human rights abuses, Romero felt he had a duty to act, a duty to speak out. In his sermons, he would list disappearances, tortures, murder and much more each Sunday. He would follow that up the next day with hour-long speech on radio broadcast. In an article published in *The Irish Time* in March of 1980, Peadar Kirby noted, "the archbishop's Sunday sermon was the main source in El Salvador about what was happening. It was estimated to have the largest listenership of any programme in the country."

On the 23rd of March, 1980, in the last sermon Oscar Romero ever preached, the Archbishop made this direct appeal: (allow me to read this excerpt in its entirety)

“I would like to make a special appeal to the men of the army, and specifically to the ranks of the National Guard, the police and the military. Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brother peasants when any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God which says, “Thou shalt not kill.” No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you recovered your consciences and obeyed your consciences rather than a sinful order. The church, the defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such an abomination. We want the government to face the fact that reforms are valueless if they are to be carried out at the cost of so much blood. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression.”

It was a passionate and courageous sermon, that flowed out of his calling, his vocation, his conviction of what it means to be a follower of Jesus; what it means to have seen the glory of God in the face of Christ. Yes he condemned the action of the military, the security forces, but he loved the soldiers who were carrying out those sinful acts. He called them brothers. He loved them enough to call on them to repent, to change their ways, to obey a higher power, a higher law.

The following evening, after celebrating a Mass at a small chapel at the Divine Providence Hospital, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down by an unknown assassin. He died right at the centre of the altar.

His funeral took place a week later, in the Metropolitana Cathedral of San Salvador, attended by more than 250,000 mourners. During the procession (or protest as some called it), gunmen (plural) open fire on the mourners / protesters. It was allegedly to be members of security forces, although it has never been corroborated. In the ensuing panic, a stampede broke out, 44 more people lost their lives.

During the darkest hours of the history El Salvador, Romero held on to the promise of God who said, “Light will shine out of darkness”. He did

what he could, with the pulpit he had, without counting the cost, not knowing what was to come. Shortly after his death, Pope John Paul II eulogized Romero as a "beloved, peacemaking man of God," and stated that "his blood will give fruit to brotherhood, love and peace."

It would take another decade for the civil war to wane. The square in front of the Metropolitana Cathedral would become the site of celebrations after the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accord, that ended the Salvadoran Civil War in 1992. The cathedral and the square is now a major tourist attraction and a site of pilgrimage, which was described by Pope John Paul II as "intimately allied with joys and hopes of the Salvadoran people."

It is most appropriate that the Salvadoran people celebrates the festival of the Transfiguration of Jesus, in the square in front of the Metropolitana Cathedral. It is there, the martyrdom of Romero is remembered. It is there, the glory of God in the face of Christ becomes not abstract theology but practiced reality. It is there, hope is rekindled and never to be put out.

The story of Archbishop Oscar Romero is worthy to be remembered, but far from unique. Men and women of faith, followers and disciples of Jesus Christ, have lived out their faith and made differences in the history of humanity. William Wilberforce and his evangelical compatriots led the movement to abolish the slave trade in 19th century. Dietrich Bonhoeffer paid the ultimate cost of discipleship in his resistance to the Nazi dictatorship during WWII. Martin Luther King Jr. and his dream led the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960's. Tommy Douglas, out of his Christian conviction, brought the universal health care first to Saskatchewan, later to the rest of Canada. Even the late Pauline Brown, a beloved member of St. Giles, who dedicated her life, 70 years of them, to share the Good News of Jesus with the people of India.

That's just to name of few well known examples in recent history. Countless others have live out their Christian faith, with perseverance, with integrity, with conviction, with what the author and theologian Eugene Peterson calls it, 'a long obedience in the same direction'. Their stories, though may not be remember by many or at all, are nevertheless remembered by the Lord God, who delights in all God's beloved sons and daughters. For that we give thanks to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**