

3.22.2023 Lent Midweek, Week 4

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 58:6-10; Matthew 25:31-40

“You did it to me”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight, we remember two saints commemorated this week on the church calendar: Joseph, Guardian of Jesus (March 19), and Óscar Romero, archbishop of El Salvador (March 24).

As we think about these two saints, we remember that the gospel has always been proclaimed in the midst of difficult historical circumstances. In our own era, it has been the perspective of Liberation Theology that has helped us see that theological voices are always spoken in an historical context. This means that, beginning from the early church, Christians have always sought to tell the story of Jesus and his love within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts and events. From the beginning, the writers of the gospels clearly proclaimed Jesus and his life within the historical time in which he lived.

A very good example of this can be seen in Joseph, the guardian of Jesus and husband of Mary, whom we remember tonight. Joseph’s own story is also told within the political strife of first century Palestine. In a dream, Joseph is told, *“do not fear to take Mary to be your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

Joseph was faithful to the command of the angel in the dream. After Jesus’ birth, Joseph was again warned in a dream to flee to Egypt because King Herod was searching for the baby to destroy it. Faithful to God’s command, Joseph took the child and Mary by night and departed for Egypt. In doing so, the holy family became refugees fleeing an unstable political climate in which an enraged ruler killed every child two years old and younger in an attempt to ensure his own political life.

Matthew’s gospel is told from the standpoint of the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ into a world of Roman colonial and imperial power, a world of political oppression to any who posed a threat to this power. Joseph is honored as the “guardian of Jesus,” and is also called the “patron of refugees.” Joseph is a reminder that God walked with the holy family, who like many today, continue to find themselves as refugees fleeing war and disaster.

The second person we remember tonight, Óscar Romero, was archbishop of El Salvador from 1977-1980. Archbishop Romero was murdered on March 24, 1980 while standing at the altar

celebrating Mass at the Carmelite chapel of the Hospital de la Divina Providencia. Romero was murdered because he dared to preach the gospel of Christ's love by casting the light Christ upon the political and military oppression which was taking place in El Salvador at that time.

While we do not have time tonight to fully unpack the colonial history of Latin America, we must say that Christianity was brought to the Americas as a part of the Iberian military conquest of the sixteenth century. From that time onward in Latin America, the church became a key component of the colonial structure, and the church remained a conservative voice even after many nations experienced liberation from Spain in the early 19th century. In 1968, after the Second Vatican Council, the Medellín Conference of Bishops spoke prophetically of "a preferential option for the poor" revealing that God sides with the poor and oppressed of this world by calling on the church to be the liberating voice of Jesus in this world.

The military government of El Salvador brutally silenced with death squads any who sought to organize, help or voice resistance to military rule. Though Óscar Romero was initially a social conservative, after his election as archbishop of El Salvador, he became a prophetic voice of justice siding with the poor and the oppressed. Romero fully understood that God participates in history through the loving reign of Jesus Christ. Romero understood that as a Christian he also had to participate in history as Christ's voice for the oppressed.

Throughout the season of Lent in early 1980, archbishop Romero preached openly and vocally about the violence and murder he saw around him. In his homily on March 2nd, the second Sunday in Lent, Romero reported that during the first month of 1980 over six hundred persons had been killed due to political violence. On the day before his murder, Sunday, March 23rd, Romero, in his homily, called upon soldiers, the national guard, and police to remember that those they were killing were their brothers and sisters. Romero called them to remember God's commandment, "*Thou shalt not kill.*"

The following day, Monday March 24th, Romero was shot and killed while standing at the altar celebrating a memorial Mass. His last words spoken to the congregation are as follows:

By Christian faith we know that at this moment the host of wheat becomes the body of the Lord who offered himself for the redemption of the world, and that the wine in this chalice is transformed into the blood that was the price of salvation. May this body that was immolated and this flesh that was sacrificed for humankind also nourish us so that we can give our bodies and our blood to suffering and pain, as Christ did, not for our own sake but

to bring justice and peace to our people...

Seconds later a shot rang out in the chapel killing the archbishop. Óscar Romero had become the living sacrifice of Christ for others, and his life lives on as a witness to incarnating Jesus' love for others.

One week earlier on March 16th, the fourth Sunday in Lent, Romero preached the following in his homily:

In Christ God comes close to us. Christ has given us a standard: "I was hungry and you gave me [something] to eat." When someone comes to your house asking for water, it is Christ who comes, if you see with the eyes of faith. When a sick person is longing for a visit, Christ tells you, "I was sick or in prison and you came to visit me." So many people today are ashamed to give testimony in favor of the innocent...If only we could see Christ in the needy, in the tortured, in the prisoner, in the murder victim; if only we could see Christ in every human form dumped so disgracefully along our highways, we would discover that it was Christ who was dumped there, and we would gather that precious treasure with tenderness; we would kiss him and never be ashamed of him.

Tonight's gospel reading from Matthew 25 is of Jesus' judgment of the nations. It is a reminder that God's concerns are for the poor and the oppressed in this world. Matthew not only situated Christ's birth in the political narrative of first century Palestine, he also proclaimed Jesus as the King and Lord of history who will judge us by our treatment of those in need. For Romero, the church was to be "a missionary of reconciliation" telling the world, in the midst of all our differences, "Love one another, and be reconciled with God."

Tonight, as we remember Saint Joseph and Óscar Romero, we are encouraged to see how human beings can become living signs of God's love for "the least of these."

We each live in a particular moment in history. During Lent God calls us to the fast that Isaiah describes, "*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*" God's love is being revealed through you in this particular moment of history.

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me." Amen.