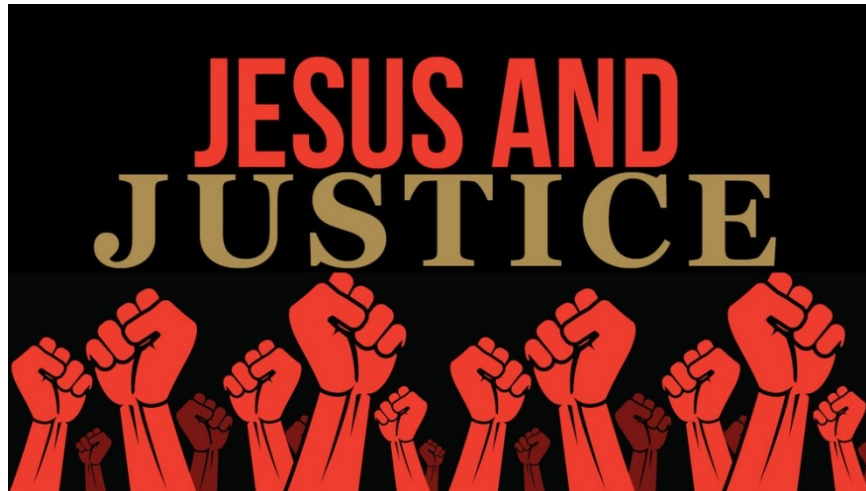




Diocese of Leeds:
Justice & Peace Commission
For the Common Good in our Common Home



Acting out of Prophetic Imagination

The third of 3 Talks given
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Part of our Day of Shared Reflection – ‘Has the Church become a
‘Not for Prophets’ Organisation?’

*Saturday 15 October 2022 at St Robert’s Parish Rooms, Robert Street,
Harrogate*

Diocese of Leeds: Justice & Peace Commission
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Introduction

Anthropologists tell us that "*To know what, where, how, when and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society.*" (Farb and Amelagos, 1980, p.211) Jesus' stories of the open table fellowship of the Kingdom are shocking. He tells of invitations to meals that do not map against class, or gender, or status or moral worth. He seems to have acted out his own teaching by eating with men and women of any and every station ignoring distinctions. And as you'd expect he is fiercely criticised - his enemies saying he eats with tax-collectors, traitors, sinners and whores (Lk. 7:33-34; Mth. 11:18-19). They implicitly suggest he is no better than those he associates with. People thought then that sin was contagious! It is not surprising that his family (Mrk 3:20) come to take him back home because they thought he was "*beside himself*" i.e. mad! Prophetic acts are directed to changing consciousness, changing the way things are, but they inevitably provoke opposition from those who would have to change most.

The Pharisees in particular clashed with Jesus over his eating practice. In an attempt to keep the purity of Jewish life, corrupted by Greco-Roman influences and their leaders' collusion, they had taken all the dietary and purity rules applicable to the Priests in the Temple and adapted them to the domestic table of the home. Their pure homes took the place of the impure Temple. The Pharisees notion of a holy people was, symbolically, a nation of priests even though they were a lay movement.

But in the process they effectively cut off the mass of the peasants of Galilee and Judaea from their circle of holiness. **The people of the soil**, could not give the time and effort needed to maintaining such ritual practices of purity, tithing, only buying from certain sources, etc. Jesus prophetic shared meals are a direct provocation to such pharisaic practices. For them he is unclean because of the people he eats with. He is contaminated by associating with the sinners and the unclean/impure.

Jesus actions are clear and direct. He locates the centre of God's people differently. At his meals outsiders become insiders as an enactment of the coming of God's Kingdom. He says: "*Many will come from east and west, from north and south and sit at table in the reign of God*" (Lk 13:29; Mth 8:11). The meals become rituals of reversal. He turns the received wisdom and vision of



the religious and social elites upside down and effectively points to the breaking in of God's reign among the very people that the holy ones exclude. We see this clearly and deliberately with the mass feeding of crowds in the desert. No-one checks their religious credentials. No rituals of purification are required. All, men women and children, are invited to sit down and share whatever God provides. You know the outcome. All shared and there was enough and more. The gracious kingdom of the free God was breaking in and was open to all. Jesus enacted a new, promised but forgotten, community of freedom that is now our challenge to re-imagine, enable and celebrate in our time.

Jesus – The Story of a Woman Activist

Before looking at an example from our times I'd like to look at a story Jesus told of one Woman's effective action, better known as the parable of the Unjust Judge (Lk.18:1-8).

Luke remembers this story of Jesus in a time when the early church was already established but struggling. He imagines it as a call to persistent prayer when things seem against us. But I'd like to place it back in the context of Jesus life-time when a more radical message emerges for those of us engaged in action for change.



Widows were vulnerable in Jesus' society. They were among the powerless ones like the orphaned children and foreign workers that Jesus calls "the little ones". His story presumes the woman is without support. Or worse, that her family have undermined her inheritance rights by bribing the local judge. A woman had to be represented in court by a man, usually of her immediate family. But Jesus tells us she is alone. Her prospect of

receiving justice is not hopeful. The Hebrew scriptures have beautiful texts that state God will always hear the cry of the powerless widow (Ex. 22:21-24) and demand God's people respect and care for widows. But there are so many of these texts in Deuteronomy and the Prophets that it is clear that such compassionate practice was often lacking.



Jesus' story assumes the Widow's claims are just, but that she has no means to bribe the judge to act affirmatively on her behalf. The presumption is the Judge has already been bribed to find against her. Jesus tells us the Judge is so corrupt that he "*neither fears God nor respects human beings*". This is already clear as he deals with her case alone. All such cases, by right, demand a tribunal, so bribes have already perverted the Law.

The Jewish Talmud will later call such officials "Robber Judges" "*willing to pervert justice for a dish of meat*" i.e. a good meal! This is a judge who has colluded with the methods of the Roman forces of occupation and their systematic alienation of the local masses from their means of support and survival, the land. He has helped to create a growing culture of debt and dependency.

But the Woman does not give up. She sees clearly what is happening, she knows what her rights are and she works out an effective strategy to bring about the justice which the system is depriving her of. She does not appeal to the court, as the local justice system has been clearly undermined. She identifies the key figure who can change things and targets him – the unjust Judge. She goes public. She appears day after day at the town gate where the men of influence gather and cries out against him. One woman's voice insistently, repeatedly, calling for justice.

She speaks the truth and many there will recognise it as truth. She makes public the barely hidden corruption of the Law which should serve all. Notice her emphasis is on calling him to do justice. She is calling him to account in public. And it is this voice crying for justice, emerging day by day from the generalised collusion with corruption, which makes a difference and wears him down. He can only take a certain amount of shame, beyond that his own authority and value will be undermined.

In Jesus story the judge eventually says "*she will wear me out with her continual bruising*" (literally "*punches to the face*"!). Unable to appeal to integrity or compassion she has taken an untypical role of assertive action. She makes it not worth his while to continue, If he loses too much status and respect his wealthy backers may no longer have use for him.

In the end the victim calling for justice, saying it as it is, becomes a powerful prophetic voice calling the corrupt system to account. Her refusal to lie down,



to collude and accept the system that oppresses, opens up an alternative unforeseen possibility.

Jesus gives us a model of a thoughtful and creative woman whose unorthodox action, beyond the norms of gender and status, gains the just verdict that appeal to the compromised system could never have achieved. As a piece of sustained grass roots activism it has a lot to teach us.

Note again what Jesus is doing in this and other parables. He is drawing on the **experience of the people**, provoking them to see their world clearly but from a renewed perspective, “*the kingdom of God*”, and inviting them to become **subjects of their own history**. He **empowers** the exploited and oppressed to re-claim their history, to **see it anew**, to imagine it and to **participate** in realising it.

There is a danger when we read these texts in church that we spiritualise them into a purely personal message. What do they mean for me? Then we miss their call to renew our **collective vision** of a creation under God. There, all are of equal worth.

There the solidarity in service, the distribution and sharing of the goods of the earth, is at the centre of our collective concern rather than their accumulation for profit and personal security.

Above all these are texts to provoke collective reflection, discussion and debate, in the midst of the conflicted reality we find ourselves in.

A Kingdom of the Living Dead

This is all part of the horizon of that kingdom or rule of God that Jesus invited the people of his time to enter. At the heart of his teaching are a series of sayings that we now call the Beatitudes. The familiar received translation of the first of these (Luke 6:20 NRSV) goes something like: “*Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of heaven.*” But the Greek word *ptochoi* translated as poor is not simply poor. Poor and rich define our status within the same world but at different ends of a sliding scale. *Ptochos* is someone off the scale, a destitute person, without family or social ties, a wanderer. Indeed it is derived from the classical Greek word for a corpse. Jesus’ kingdom is not a kingdom of the poor but of the destitute, the derelict, of the living dead. The kingdom is not centred on the worthy hardworking peasant or artisan but on



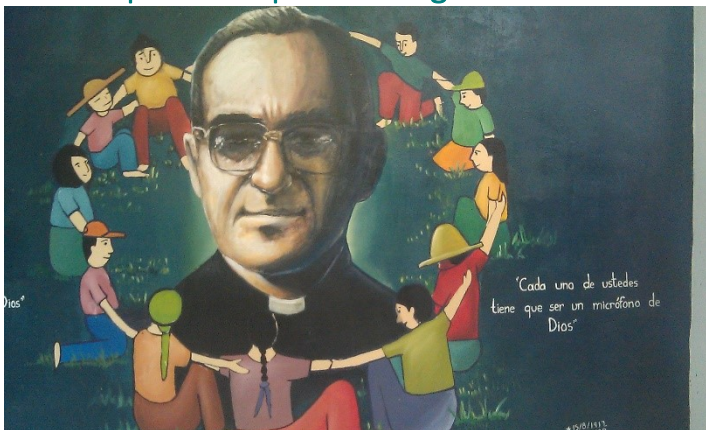
the unclean, the degraded, the expendable, the powerless, and all too often, then as now, the children.

Note the **basis** of his critique of power and authority – it lacked justice and truth. “*What is truth?*” Pilate asks and under pressure saves himself. The question expresses the void undermining Pilate’s own authority. His wealth and that of the Jerusalem elite is at others expense, that of their neighbour. Not to love one’s neighbour is for Jesus not to know the God who is the father of the neighbour, and the source of truth. It is not to live in truth.

Jesus saw the misuse of power as arising inevitably out of the profit motive – *mammon*.(Luke. 12:21-23; Mth. 6:19-20) The rich lost their chance of knowing God, their minds clouded by the unrestricted desire to enrich themselves, leading inevitably to an insensitivity towards the brother or sister in need. This is brilliantly, and brutally, spelt out in the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in Luke 16: 19-31. For Jesus, to be deaf to the cry of the poor is to be deaf to God.

Such solidarity with the poor made him a threat to the Jerusalem power elite it provoked his brutal death and it inspires us to explore again the religious, political and economic, structures of our own time and their repercussions; repercussions for our sense of ourselves, of others, for our planet and its multiple species and of the very image of God that we take for granted.

An Example of Prophetic Imagination Enacted in Our Time.



Oscar Romero was an unlikely prophet. Virtuous, cautious, studious he and thousands of young seminarians in Rome from Chicago, Coventry, Calgary, Calcutta, Kinshasa, Bucharest, Lisbon and even Ciudad Barrios, learnt all the answers to questions no-one in their

own countries and communities and certainly none of the poor, the hungry, the destitute of the world, were asking.

He was taught Aristotle’s saying : *Virtus stat in media via* –i.e. the good, or the virtuous, way is always the moderate, the middle way, between extremes.



Passion and enthusiasm of any sort were to be avoided. This was the underlying original meaning of his motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia*. To **think** rightly, always, as the Church thinks. Hardly the cry of a prophet!

But over the years of working with very particular, very real, people in very particular, real places Romero began to read the gospel **from their questions**. He began **to see differently** and **feel differently**. He had always worked with and for the poor, out of a deep and profound charity, out of love for them. But he had not asked the question: ***Why are the poor poor? What is it in society that allows a few to hold such total power over the way things are, a monopoly over wealth and wealth production?*** He had never considered the structural sin in his world.

Indeed initially he was afraid that such questions, already being asked by theologians, like Helder Camara, Gutierrez, Ignacio Ellacuria, Leonardo Boff or John Sobrino, were too political and too materialist.

The subtle carefully balanced **distinctions** of Aquinas and others between the natural and the supernatural, the body and soul, the Church and the World, had been taught to him as **separations**. It took time and new experience to see such separations as incompatible with the incarnate presence of God's Word and Spirit within the world.

It was his unexpected appointment as Archbishop, to the capital of San Salvador, brought him personally up against the extremes of wealth and poverty in a new way, and the death of his friend Fr. Rutilio Grande and his companions, and the lack of concern of the civil authorities made these questions brutally near, like no theology course ever had. And now the other possible translation of his motto ***Sentire cum Ecclesia*** - **to feel with the Church** - became more insistent.

Vatican II happened with its teaching on ***the Church in the Modern World***, as the pilgrim people of God amongst of the joys and suffering of their fellow men and women. The South American Bishops meetings in Puebla and Medellin emphasised the gospel's teaching on God's preferential option for the poor. The scriptures and Oscar's preaching ministry opened up anew as he re-read Moses encounter with the strange God, so much stranger than in the certainties of his roman theology .



Now Oscar learnt anew from the prophets, from the Mary of the *Magnificat* and the Jesus of the parables, of the bias of this strange liberating God. The bias towards the oppressed, the frail, the nobodies, the widow, the stranger, the orphan, the powerless ones. Jesus' re-working of this prophetic imagination flamed out from the pages of the Gospels anew – with the power of his opening statement in the charter of discipleship, the Beatitudes - ***“Blessed are the destitute (ptochoi) for theirs is the Kingdom of God.”*** Oscar sees this is not just in heaven but as a real space here and now into which all are invited. A real space which St Paul calls grace. So different from the sacramental graces Oscar had been taught about, which would be drip fed to the virtuous.

He asked himself if this is the case, if the God of Exodus, the God of Jesus, was to be experienced in freedom alongside the oppressed, then where should a bishop stand but alongside them in that “space of grace”. If all are created male and female in the image and likeness of God then to wound, oppress, and destroy one of the least of these little ones is to commit the greatest offence against that free creative liberating God. A far greater sin than the sins against any orthodoxy, or sins of failure in one's private personal spiritual struggle, over which he, Oscar, had been so scrupulous.

If the prophetic imagination of Jesus reveals a free self-emptying of the creator liberator God, to share the life and limits and hungers and fears of a Palestinian craft worker, what does that demand of a contemporary bishop? Romero in the last three amazing years of his life in an increasingly focused way lived out what pope Francis now preaches. Romero was the shepherd who smelt of his sheep and lived and prayed and **felt** with the church as a member of staff in a field hospital. Rather than his earlier role of an ecclesiastical bureaucrat engaged in keeping a false peace, maintaining a blasphemous status quo.

The Golden Thread of Divine Mercy and Solidarity

In the prophetic imagination that runs throughout the Jewish Christian scriptures what we now call the preferential option for the poor, God coming again and again alongside the nobodies, and declaring them *is-ra-el the people of God*, is a golden thread. It is this thread that Romero grasps ever more tightly. He begins to know ever more deeply the nature of the strange God of exodus as he gets to know ever more intimately his own suffering people.



In doing this he leaves aside the simple certainties he learnt in Rome and faces what he called “the events of the week”. These are the realities before us, which no theology can anticipate or provide neat answers for. His radio homilies became one of the few ways that his people could find out what was really happening, since a state-controlled press consistently produced censored and deliberately slanted false news. Something we have become more familiar with now in our own country, in the States, in Putin's Russia. Oscar now deliberately brought the events of the week into tension with the prophetic imagination of the scriptures and with Jesus’ parables of God’s living presence, the Kingdom.

With Oscar’s help the people could see what was real; could imagine how under the God of creation and liberation, the God of the new, it might be different. And together could work to realise that vision of God’s will for all people in the midst of their reality. Theology became shared, engaged, **inspired right action** emerging from the reality of people’s lives. Acting in the style of Jesus whose life continues to provoke us to re-imagine this in our reality.

The Inevitable Backlash

That this caused a serious backlash both within the elites of his society, and among fellow bishops who had not gone through this conversion, we all know. Like Helder Camara before him and Pope Francis after him, he is called a Marxist and much worse. But then his Lord, Jesus, was called a glutton, a drunkard, a heretic! In following through the prophetic imagination, that now inspired him, he began to see the mass of his own people as radically one with the crucified Christ; with the God who, as Paul tells us, out of love enters into the darkest that we can create or experience. In Jesus case God enters into the killing of an innocent life by a corrupt state and the denial of the presence of the living God by the orthodox religious leadership. After the cross there is no dark place anymore where God cannot be for us.

It will be this theme that the great liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, once criticised by Romero and latterly his friend, supporter and collaborator, will take up and develop in some of the finest Christian writings of our times. In doing so he turns the prophetic imagination of Oscar, lived generously till a brutal death, into a great cry of hope for us and our world. And invites us to see, and feel, and engage together anew.



Shortly before his death Romero appealed to his listeners:

“I ask all of you, dear brothers and sisters, to view these things that are happening in our historical moment with a spirit of hope, generosity, and sacrifice. And let us do what we can.” May it be so!

May we like the prophet Elisha receive the cloak from our Prophets.... no longer Elijah, but Oscar, Greta, Francis, Dorothy Stang and perhaps Volodymyr Zelensky, and may we do all they have tried and try to do, and perhaps more in our own time of opportunity.

That would be the best homage we could pay them.

A great prophetic interpreter of the scriptures from whom I have learnt much, Walter Breuggemann writes:



May each of us in our own context continue to engage with the ministry of imagination to sustain us and our companions in the great call to what the Jewish mystics call **tikkun olam** -to together heal our beautiful world and sustain its most frail and threatened people and species.

Amen! May it be so.



Further reading:

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This is one of an occasional series of publications from the Commission, following events that we have facilitated or organised. Sign up on our website to receive regular updates about our work in the Leeds Diocese and how you can become involved.



What is the Commission for?

- We exist to work alongside people in the Leeds Diocese as we try to grapple with what it means to live out our Christian vocation today.
- We celebrate all the people in the Diocese of Leeds who get involved in all sorts of ways – from campaigning about Climate Change to working with asylum seekers, from helping with food banks to writing letters to prisoners of conscience,. from campaigning for the abolition of nuclear weapons to raising awareness about Israel Palestine today.... – it could be a long list!

Above all our role is to not just to encourage *reflection* about these issues but also to encourage *action*.

What does the Commission do?

- We organise conferences, workshops and Days of Reflection to help raise awareness and to help people think about what the 'Just' Gospel response might be to specific situations of social injustice. Poverty and Climate change have been high on our agenda. Many of the issues are complex – but that does not mean we can ignore them.
- We partner with other organisations to bring events and people to Yorkshire to help us reflect on key issues. For example, we have worked with Pax Christi in the Leeds Diocese and the Romero Trust on several occasions. We have also regularly sponsored a film in the annual Leeds Palestinian Film Festival.
- We publish pamphlets like this one!

Find out more by signing up to receive regular monthly updates from the Commission. Fill in the form on our website:

www.leedsjp.org.uk