ORDINARY TIME TWENTY NINTH SUNDAY YEAR B 2018 HOMILY

(ISAIAH 53: 10-11; Hebrews 4: 14-16; Mark 10: 35-45 Long)

JESUS OUR SERVANT AND OUR EXAMPLE

When I was about to be ordained a deacon in 1982, I asked a fellow seminarian to design an invitation card for me. This guy was an excellent artist and he produced a beautiful card for me. I used for my theme on the invitation the passage from today’s Gospel from Mark where Jesus says to his disciples: “I did not come to be served but to serve and to give [my] life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10: 45). This beautiful phrase epitomizes what it means to be a deacon – and by the way, the English word “deacon” also comes from a Greek word meaning a servant. And our seminary teachers kept reminding us that when we were ordained priests, we would still be deacons too – that is, humble servants like Christ.

Jesus says these famous words about service after trying to teach his disciples what his life and mission was all about. Two of his apostles, the brothers James and John, came to Jesus and asked him to let them be the most powerful in his kingdom. Jesus explains to them that he did not seek power and rule, but only the cup of suffering and a Baptism by fire – which they too would have to accept. (And they blithely did accept, without knowing what they were saying at the time.) Then Jesus tells all his apostles that they cannot be like the Gentiles who try to lord it over others. Rather they must be slaves of all if they want to be great and to be the first in his kingdom – after his own example. This is his message to us too and to all his disciples throughout history.

The Son of God did not come seeking to control and dominate. He emptied himself of his divinity to take on our lowly humanity and to be our joyful slave as
Jesus Christ. Yet it is interesting that he was accused of being political. During his Passion according to St. John, the Jewish religious leaders accused Jesus of being against the Roman Empire and they told Pilate that this man tried to make himself a king and thus a threat to the Emperor. They shouted to Pilate: “If you free this man you are no ‘Friend of Caesar.’ Anyone who makes himself a king becomes Caesar’s rival” (John 19: 12). This sealed Jesus’ fate and the cowardly Pilate delivered him up to crucifixion.

The leaders of the Jews lied that Christ wanted to be a king. But the real reason they hated him was that he accused them of hypocrisy. He bluntly told them they were like tombs painted white (cf. Matthew 23: 27) because they sought to be masters of the people and neglected the poor and the lowly. They unjustly judged people and laid heavy religious burdens on others while they exempted themselves. In this sense, Jesus was “political.” That is, he preached truth to power – to the power exercised by a corrupt crowd of Jewish leaders who wanted to be served and never lowered themselves to be of service.

Other outstanding followers of Christ throughout history have been accused of being “political.” Last Sunday, October 21, Pope Francis canonized several saints, including Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) and Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. In 1980 agents of the wealthy and powerful tiny ruling class in El Salvador murdered Archbishop Romero while he was saying Mass at a convent for nuns. It is remarkable how many martyrs over the ages have been killed while saying Mass or praying in churches.

After his assassination, the common people immediately acclaimed Romero a martyr. But many influential Catholics, both clergy and lay, as well as powerful
government leaders in El Salvador and throughout the Americas (both north and south) and throughout the world said that Romero had acted out of a political ideology and not out of Gospel values. Therefore, he did not die for the Catholic faith, but rather for a political agenda. This wrangling went on for over three decades until Pope Benedict XVI cleared the way for Oscar Romero to be declared a martyr for Christ. And of course, Pope Francis embraced this course of action which led to Romero being declared a saint in heaven. A mural of him is in our beautiful church back there over the inside of the south entrance into the nave.

The canonization of Oscar Romero and of others like him in history and in the future reaffirms that it is part of Christ’s teaching in the Gospel and therefore of our Catholic faith to stand up for the poor and the oppressed – even if we are accused of being “political.” The church has the right to stand for certain political causes that uphold her teaching about life and justice. This is not the same as endorsing a political ideology.

As we know, Pope Francis has been steady in his defense of the long-standing social teachings of the church about the “preferential option for the poor.” And he specifically advocates constantly for those whose basic rights and needs are neglected and ignored through the indifference of powerful government and corporate leaders. This “global indifference,” as the pope calls it, is antithetical to the Biblical tradition of caring for “the widow, the orphan, and the alien” – which in today’s world would include poverty-stricken families and refugees. Francis is also a zealous proponent of saving the earth, “Our Common Home” as he calls it, from largely man-made global warming. Some both outside and inside the church, have angrily criticized Francis – even calling him a “communist.” It is well to recall
that Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) was called the “Red Pope” for condemning the unjust treatment of workers (including and especially children) and for defending the right of workers to form labor unions. Also, the famous Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara (1909-1999) once remarked: “when I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are hungry, they call me a communist.”

Jesus was a servant, but he was no pushover. He spoke truth to power, which is a political act. We are called to do the same – to be servants but not subservient. Among the greatest economic injustices in our country in our time are a health system that denies decent health insurance to tens of millions and the fact that tens of millions who want to work cannot make a living wage to support their families. The American bishops officially speak out against these injustices -- but they are widely ignored.

I will end with three quotes from Archbishop Oscar Romero: “Aspire not to have more, but to be more.” And also, “when the church hears the cry of the oppressed, it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.” And finally, “the ones who have a voice must speak for the voiceless.” The canonization of Oscar Romero is a challenge to all of us. It is precisely the same challenge that the Gospel and our Catholic Social Teaching present to us. Christ calls us as individual Catholics and as the St. Paul community to continue to try our best to respond to this challenge.