

Prophetic Trajectories of Hope from San Salvador to Liverpool: *A Celebration of the ministries of Oscar Romero, Austin Smith, Tom Cullinan and Kevin Kelly*

The PowerPoint which accompanies the lecture can be viewed on the Romero Trust website.

(Slide 1) In times of complexity, confusion, false news, collusion, manipulation and oppression we need those in our midst who see clearly, who still believe it is possible to touch what is real and true, and who can share this vision of hope in the midst of the surrounding fog. A unexpected prophetic renaissance has emerged across our planet in the last 50 years and the four figures we will consider still inspire us beyond their deaths.

(Slide 2) As with Isaiah in his time so in every age we need men and women who open up for us the prophetic imagination of a Moses at the burning bush, or Hosea and Amos in a time of national crisis, or of Jesus in his time. Always the prophet speaks out in times of lament, of crisis, or forgetfulness when the original vision has grown dim and is now accommodated, packaged into controllable parcels and soundbites. When the access to the divine message has become re-interpreted, controlled by elites, spiritual, political or academic.

The prophet is rarely obvious from their early life. Moses was a member of the elite oppressive ruling class, Isaiah is a court prophet without a king, an exile in Babylon along with Ezekiel. But they were called to see anew, to keep the prophetic imagination of exodus and covenant alive. To remember and re-encounter again the strange God, **(Yahweh) I am who I am, I will be who I will be, I will be where I will be**, who from the beginning escapes definition and description, confinement or manipulation. Who is always with us but ahead of us.

With the decline of Babylon and the emergence of Persia and its shrewdly tactical ruler Cyrus, Isaiah raises again the hope of a renewed exodus and a return to the land, to live out anew, in full, the call to a free covenant with this strange free God. The years in exile have allowed Isaiah and others to gather the traditions and memories of the people, to re-imagine what that new Promised Land was meant to be. They gather these memories into the texts we call the Pentateuch or the Hebrew bible. The time of brutal exile and loss had stripped away inessentials. There is the possibility of a return with renewed vision and a renewed purpose. In the vision of the prophet the word God has become dangerous and disturbing once again.

When Jesus started his ministry he faced a land where the rule of Rome underpinned and undermined the outwardly Hebraic traditions. But the Temple was compromised, the aristocracy colluded with imperial authorities and the only reform movements were so pure that the people of the soil, the mass of peasant workers, could not follow their laws and dictates; e.g. the 300 plus priestly rules adopted by the radical Pharisees. There was a lot of law, orthodoxy, right thinking, but the prophetic imagination had been lost.

(Slide) Jesus very first public teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth proclaims his renewal of that prophetic imagination in his time. But Luke has this already heralded by the marginal figures of his expectant mother and her old cousin Elizabeth when their two voices rise in a harmony of the prophetic imagination of their people. ***"My soul glorifies the Lord my spirit rejoices...he puts down he mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly. The hungry he fills with good things the rich he sends empty away..."*** Mary's *Magnificat*, which Oscar Romero, Tom Cullinan, Kevin Kelly and Austin Smith prayed every day of their ministry, renews the prophetic vision of her people and her son's life will flesh out that vision.

Oscar Romero like Austin, Kevin and Tom, is an unlikely prophet. His virtuous, cautious, studious formation in the seminary and University in Rome, with its in-depth study of a deductive theology, starting from abstract principles but with an inevitable and inexorable inner logic, lacked all passion or relevance. He and thousands of young seminarians learnt all the answers to questions no-one was asking. This was the same initial formation of Austin, Kevin and Tom born twenty years after Oscar but into a Church that had changed little. Alongside this he imbibed a spirituality that was either the discipline and effort of mental prayer focused on heaven or else a gently affective and emotive focus on the lives of the saints and the motherly care of Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of the Church and of course Mother of the priest. But certainly not Mary the powerful prophetic singer of the magnificat, prophesying the bringing down of the powerful and the raising up of the destitute and powerless – a true daughter of Is-ra-el the people of the God. The strange free disturbing God, capable of reversing things, capable of initiating the new.

The true life of any faithful servant of the church was neatly summarised in aphorism as: *Virtus stat in media via*. (Derived from Aristotle's advice to his son Nichomachus in the *Nichomachaen Ethics* later used extensively by Aquinas on his treatment of virtue . Cf. ST ii-ii q.146, 1 arg. 3).

Virtus stat in media via –i.e. the good or the virtuous way is always the moderate, the middle way, between extremes; enthusiasm of any sort is to be avoided. This was the vision commended to Oscar and our Liverpool prophets to conform to in their seminary and monastic training. This was the underlying meaning of the original interpretation of Oscar's motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia*. To **think** rightly, always, as the Church thinks. Hardly the cry of a prophet!

(SLIDE) The Neo-Scholastic theology, the theology of the Catholic Colleges, Seminaries, Monasteries and Universities of the time, which he learnt, was in the form of theses, questions and answers. However the questions had no particular social, political, or economic context. In Rome students from all over the world, from Chicago, Coventry, Calgary, Calcutta, Kinshasa, Bucharest, Lisbon and even Ciudad Barrios and Liverpool - learnt the same questions and the same answers. Answers to questions that no-one in their own countries and communities of El Salvador or Liverpool and Toxteth and certainly none of the poor, the racially abused, the oppressed, the hungry, the destitute of the world were asking.

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** and things began gradually to change. 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 as a young busy dutiful priest and then administrator Bishop he had not asked the question: ***Why are the poor poor; what is it in society that allows a minority 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 Romero was afraid that such questions which were being asked by the Jesuit theologians, like Ignacio Ellacuria or John Sobrino, were too political and too materialist. The subtle carefully balanced **distinctions** of Aquinas, and his contemporaries, between the natural and the supernatural, the body and soul, the Church and the World, the spiritual and material had in his formation and that of Kevin and Austin, been reduced to **separations**. It would take time and new experience to see such separations as incompatible with the incarnate presence of God's Word and Spirit within the world. Tom Cullinan would come to this

more gently through living the humanistic, more incarnational, framework of the Rule of Benedict, older than such fragmented and fragmenting theologies..

(Slide) The depth of the conflict between the prophetic imagination of Jesus, his vision of God's reign, and the controlling manipulative oppressive powers of this world, had not yet become clear or painful enough for Romero. But 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 murder of his friend Fr. Rutilio Grande and his companions, and the lack of concern of the civil authorities made these questions brutally real, like no scholastic theology thesis ever had. And now the other meaning of his motto *Sentire cum Ecclesia* - **to feel with the Church** - became more insistent.

(Slide) And in the meantime in the light of Vatican II's teaching on ***the Church in the Modern World***, and the South American Bishops emerging teachings at Puebla and Medellin and their deliberate emphasis on a preferential option for the poor, his sense of the Church itself had changed. The emphasis had shifted from the right thinking community under the rightful authority of the magisterium, to feeling and thinking alongside and with the pilgrim people of God in their journey in history and in the midst of their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, in the context of political, social, and economic forces and structures that in some sense could be called sinful. One of Romero's favourite sayings from the early Christian Church was of Irenaeus of Lyons "*Gloria dei vivens homo*" *God's glory is a fully alive human person.* - but Oscar's expanding awareness turned this into *Gloria Dei vivens pauperum* *God's Glory Is the fully alive poor.*

The scriptures and his 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 with its seemingly clear coherent treatises of ***De Deo Uno*** (On the One God) and ***De Deo Trino*** (On the Tri-une God). Two separate, technically dense courses, on the reality of God taught differently by different Professors and which never quite came together! How Jesus Christ must laugh at his theologians.

(Slide) Now Oscar learnt anew, from the prophets and above all from the Mary of the *Magnificat* and the Jesus of the parables, of the dangerous bias of this strange liberating God.

The bias towards the oppressed, the frail, the nobodies, the widow, the stranger/migrant, 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."*** They don't have to win or achieve it. It is theirs because God chooses to align God's strange self with them. Oscar sees this Kingdom as not just in heaven but as a real space here and now into which all are invited. A real space which Jesus himself chose to inhabit by becoming one of the ***ptochoi***, the dispossessed, in his wandering ministry which among the elites would have made him, Jesus, an object of contempt and latterly of fear. The Land was meant to give stability and here he chooses to be unstable, to be alongside the dispossessed and landless – his family are scandalised and come to bring him home, to stabilise him but he refuses. Around Jesus a new space opens up, a space which St Paul calls Grace. A space where the Spirit inspired "new" can happen. So different from the graces Oscar and Austin, Tom and Kevin had been taught about which would be drip fed to the virtuous in their stable communities, dispensed through the sacraments like holy opioids...

If that is the case, if the God of Exodus, the God of Jesus, was to be experienced in transcendent freedom alongside the oppressed, then where should a bishop, a priest, any disciple stand but alongside them in the space of grace. This would be the space, with different accents and emphases, that Austin, Tom and Kevin would also choose to inhabit in and around Liverpool. Through their lives and teaching and prayer and poetry they would enable others to encounter the disturbing God alongside them in that space.

(Slide) Tom Culinan, in a little pamphlet of quotes he puts together for those who might enter this space with him, uses a term from the rule of Benedict. The term is Stability and it is a vow a Benedictine takes to remain in this place with these people for the rest of their lives. It involves a radical form of asceticism, of self-denial. But Tom with the imagination of the prophet who has encountered the disturbing presence of God realises that we are all called to this stability, precisely everywhere: He quotes the monk bishop Anthony Bloom:

"Wherever I am, I stand before the face of God. Whether the divine grace takes me up and brings me close to the divine mysteries in vision...or whether I am at the bottom of the pit and cry out Godwards, in danger of perdition, He is there and there is no need for me to look for him

elsewhere. If God is not for me here , he is nowhere to be found.....Wherever wonder or broken-heartedness seizes upon us, we can turn Godwards, we can establish ourselves face to face with Him and cry to Him from the deep...This is monastic stability within one's vocation." (Anthony Bloom)

Tom realised that stability has to be relocated if discipleship is to be faithful to Jesus the unstable one. 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 who chose to dwell among us and now lives in our depths in the Holy Spirit of communion which binds us into the divine life. To avoid or oppress these *ptochoi* , these oppressed little ones, is a far greater sin than the sins against any doctrinal orthodoxy, or sins of failure in one's private personal spiritual struggle, over which Oscar's and indeed Tom's, Kevin's and Austin's formation had been so scrupulous.

This consciousness is profoundly opened up in chapter 7 of Austin's searing text *Journeying with God*. In the chapter called "Pyramids of Power and Powerlessness" at one level he is analysing patterns of power but at the heart of the chapter is a renewed meditation on the disturbing nature of God's self-revelation as Yahweh I am. He says:

"A true understanding of this name of God, at this stage of my life, becomes for me the root of all my believing. It leads me to an understanding of the totality of Jesus' mission...a forgiving and ...fulfilling love which we call grace..." out of this "...human beings must be able to see a future, and indeed, invest in a future in this world....I must not create or participate in the creation of any 'not yet' in history which blesses or spiritualises ideologies and institutions which marginalise and oppress the powerless. Indeed I must not even agree to co-exist with them never mind bless or spiritualise them. On the contrary, I must confront them. Not to do so is to blaspheme the name of God and the name of humanity by a process of manipulative escapism in the name of my own comfort."(1990, pp 78-79)

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 or indeed any disciple? Romero in the last three amazing years of his life in an increasingly focused way lived out what Pope Francis now freely preaches, no longer from the margins but from the centre . In Francis terms 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 an ecclesiastical bureaucrat engaged in keeping a false peace, maintaining a blasphemous stability, keeping the holy space pure and orthodox.. Francis has learnt well from his martyr Salvadorean brother and Oscars prophetic voice booms out through Francis as the “microphone of Christ”.

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.

(Slide) In doing this he leaves aside the simple certainties of the theology he learnt in Rome and faces what he called “*the events of the week*”. This is something that Austin Smith and Kevin and indeed Tom would have resonated with from Austin’s years of work with the Young Christian Workers and Young Christian Students who had to bring each weekly meeting to bring a “fact of the week” an observation about working life or student life which would form the basis for seeing that life more clearly assessing it in the light of the Gospel and finding realistic ways to go back to it to make a difference. In his radio sermons every Sunday Romero starts from “the events of the week”. The realities before us, before him and his people, that 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 in their city, and their country; where a state controlled press consistently produced censored and deliberately slanted false news. Now the reality, the events of the week, from the disappearing of dissidents, the terrorising of those ministering to among the powerless and marginalised, the celebration of the birthday of a sister working in the slums or among the addicted, was deliberately brought into tension with the prophetic imagination of the scriptures and of Jesus parables of God’s living presence, the Kingdom.

With Oscar’s help we could see what was real. We could imagine how under the God of creation and liberation, the God of the new, it might be different. And together we could work to realise that vision of God’s will for all people in our reality. Theology was now not so much

right thinking, the right answers to those right questions, set down so clearly and tightly by the right thinkers who did our thinking for us, but rather theology was shared, engaged, inspired right action, emerging from the reality of the people's lives.

(Slide) If you follow the stages of Kevin Kelly as a teacher of moral theology you will see this gradual transition from an always sensitive attempt to be faithfully and honestly orthodox to an increasing identification with those who religious, political and social orthodoxy had wounded and so to an engaged vision of faith as a praxis that had to be developed that both raised up and centred our concern on them and challenged the conditions and the very orthodoxies that kept them oppressed. Kevin's work in Africa at the beginning of the aids crisis and his appeal for the freedom to distribute condoms for which he was execrated by some church leaders is a good example.

(Slide) For Romero this came to be to live in the style of Jesus. His life continues to provoke us to re-imagine this in new contexts. Austin with Nicholas Postlethwaite his former student and then fellow worker went through this same breaking down of received certainties to the development of a living ministry in the midst of the marginal and the racial "other" in Toxteth among whom they lived and from whom they received wisdom. And when after eight years he got to the point where he could explain that shift in vision he wrote *Passion for the inner city* – a story, a theology of ministry and a call to action.

Sitting in front of a turf fire in the west of Ireland a young religious devoured that book in one sitting letting the turf fire die as the night went on. Austin's words fired her imagination and she wrote to him and he invited her and her congregation to join him. The congregation had other plans and sent her to Wolverhampton where with a few companions she rented a flat in the midst of a drug riddled, violent, hopeless high rise and the Hope Community was born. She is Sr Margaret Walsh and the Hope Community still flourishes and acts as a centre of liberation for many, and fired by the prophetic vision caught off Austin she went on to found Brushstrokes enabling dialogue and solidarity across cultures and faiths in supporting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Sandwell and Smethwick and then most recently in Birmingham city centre between St Chads Cathedral and the Salvation Army Hostel she founded the Sanctuary, which is precisely that, Sanctuary, for those who arrive without home and security and even the language to express their need. There hundreds of inspired

volunteers provide all the support necessary for thousands of men, women and children to regain a sense of their own worth and dignity and a renewed hope in lives beyond wars, and famines and natural disasters.

Radical envisioning like that of Romero and Kelly and Cullinan and Smith, shared with clarity and passion, bears its own fruit. 36 years ago as a young theologian I was invited by former Young Christian worker activists and leaders who wanted to continue the see, judge and act method in their mid-life working contexts to help them with a more critical reading of the Gospel. I read Tom Cullinan's essay *the Eucharist and Politics* and my life was transformed not just by the radical theology but by the clarity with which it was expressed. It changed my own doing of theology still too conceptual and disembodied and it lit up the fledgling adult Movement of Christian Workers which I shared it with here in England and eventually across Europe. Prophetic imagination and the ability to express it in words that speak to our hearts – like Mary's *Magnificat* is always transformational. Each of our Liverpool prophets had this ability although each had different mediums.

(Slide) This renewal of prophetic imagination with its engagement with experience and biblical vision caused a serious backlash for Oscar Romero both within the elites of his society, and among fellow bishops who had not gone through this conversion. Like Pope Francis after him he is called a Marxist and much worse. But then his Lord was called a glutton and a drunkard! In following through the prophetic imagination, that now inspired him, Romero 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 i.e. in Jesus the killing of innocent life by a corrupt state and the denial of the presence of the living God by a fearful self-regarding religious leadership. After the cross there is no dark place anymore where God cannot be for us as Anthony Bloom's reflection on stability implies. This is a conviction that comes through Tom's beautiful shared prayers and meditations, Austin's poems and Kevin's sermons and the ever more clearly focused talks and short papers and reports back from the various crises he investigated for Cafod.

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 theology written in 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.

There is one area where a Liverpool prophet made a shift in consciousness not in parallel with the Church of south America but before the rest of the Church . Tom Cullinan out of the deepening simplicity of his monastic practice and meditation felt the disturbing presence of Moses God anew. Felt its power to break open static religious structures just as for a short 250 years Moses prophetic imagination had done till the Kingdom of Solomom re-estblised a static Temple and holy city with a rigid hierarchy and destroyed the possibility of the dangerous new. Austin had felt the same in relation to race and class and social stratification and their historical consequences. Kevin felt it in relation of rigid ethical perspecives and inadequate definitions of sexuality and humanity.

But Tom's awareness was marked by another paradigm shift beyond the personal and social to the planetary. He saw the power of *I am who I am , I will be who I will be, I will be where I will be* to disturb our human centred views of creation. Tom saw the radical call to a relationship with creation that was open to the divine will that it was good and that it should flourish He saw the relationship was going in one direction because that original blessing had been turned into a narrative of abuse and dominance. Not only of the poor and the stranger but of the sustaining planet itself. And so he sets out to develop with any who might follow him a prophetic lifestyle of how to relate to the creation with care and mutuality, walking lightly and not abusing its extraordinary fruitfulness.

(Slide) Out of this is born the experiment that is Ince Benet a large but simple wooden dwelling self built with friends in which a small community could live and live at peace with its surrounding environment and provide facilities for those who would attempt to follow this simpler stripped down, prayer rooted , creation focused life might gather. Many of the great themes of Pope Francis Laudato Si are already anticipated – the need for a simpler lifestyle so that others might simply live, good but simple natural food, enough clothes but no excess, travel with the least impact on the land, education for a new politics and economics. And people came and went, Gathered and talked and meditated, prayed, ate and drank and sang. Prophetic imagination always needs song and poetry and art to find appropriate expression. So at the beginning in Exodus we have the liberated and liberating song of the Sea (Ex 15:1-18)

and the Song of Miriam (Ex. 15:21) which focus on the freedom of God to act and their freedom as derived from God's. The use of *Yahweh/ I am who I am*, occurs again and again as they play with its meaning and implications in song.

(Slide) In praise and song the liberated Hebrew slaves name the name that redefines their social reality, and that celebrates an unforeseen turn in history. They celebrate in dance, free bodies no long under the control of Pharaoh. Miriam picks up a tambourine and the women follow her in ecstatic dance celebrating the freedom the free God has created for them. How easy that freedom of the body has been curtailed both in Judaism and Christianity over the ages with control of the body being so often part of the oppression of religion.

You might say well these are only songs. What difference does a song make to the real world? But the shift to a new imagined reality depends in part on the words we find to express it. The culture wars we have witnessed recently in the Church are all too often based on particular forms of rhetoric, language legitimising change or managing reality, structuring and scheduling and ensuring there is no change. But Doxology, the language of praise and worship is always dangerous, it breaks out of control, and is the language which makes possible compassion and justice, transforming fear into energy.

Fired by the encounter with God who is more than we can imagine and more than we can image but whose divine love encapsulates not only men and women but all of creation, and whose wisdom is to be encountered anywhere but without doubt within the life forms that surround and sustain us in whose web of life we are held and nurtured. Tom was way ahead but it is easier to follow in his path thanks to the way he has set out for us. Like Moses he was not able to enter the promised land of a healed planet but he enabled his people to see the way forward. He went out on his bike and spoke and shared the vision.

(Slide) In the scriptures prophetic criticism starts from the people's capacity to grieve (Ex 2:23-25) *"The people of Israel groaned under their bondage and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning..."* Grieving, the most visceral response to things not being right is the beginning of prophetic imagination and criticism. We saw an extraordinary example of this, this week, in the angry grief of the speech of Greta Thunberg to the United Nation's Climate Summit *"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your*

empty words..." The word to **cry out** has a double meaning: **za'ak** is both a cry of misery but it also means the filing of an official complaint. There is an expectation that the wrong which has been cried out will be responded to and answered. This grieving, revealing all is not right, is the first moment in prophetic imagination and critical consciousness. This cry which begins history is acknowledged by God: "*I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters...*"(Ex 3:7-8)

(Slide) Our prophets have cried out at times in grief but they have also laid down markers. They have filed official complaints in society and in the Church.

We still live with the tensions of racism, locally, nationally and internationally but Austin's life in Toxteth points a way forward. Gender issues are still at the heart of current social debates but Kevin's kindly and gentle exploration of sex and sexuality, of the nature of the good human life offer a light to all who come after him.

May we like the prophet Elisha receive the cloak from our Prophets, now no longer Elijah but Oscar, Tom, Austin and Kevin and may we do all they tried to and more in our own time of opportunity. That would be the best homage we could pay them. **(Slide)** I end with the words of our Saint, Oscar:

"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!

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Further Resources:

fr-tom-cullinan.co.uk will give access to Tom's writing and talks. Some published , many not.

Cullinan, T. (A taped lecture date not recorded) *"Solomon, Satiety and Prophetic Imagination."*

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