

## Address for 31 October for St Michael's Church by Nigel Guthrie

If you visited Exeter Cathedral in the late 1400s you would have been greeted by a very different sight from today. The magnificent west front of the cathedral would have been finished only a decade or so earlier and the statues that are now worn, bare stone would have been pristine and brightly coloured. You may have seen the reconstruction of the colour scheme done by the talented artist and restorer, Eddie Sinclair which you can find if you google 'Exeter Cathedral West Front.' The figures on the west front would have given a vivid impression of the spiritual company you would be sharing as you entered the great church. The kings, prophets, saints and their supporting angels would appear to welcome you, to humble you and to offer you a vision of heaven. Perhaps St Michael's Church does that for us, too, with the carved angels surrounding us on every side of the church? Can we sense the cloud of witnesses praying with us in love, and urging us on in our faith? We should be assured that as we celebrate Mass here we do so as part of the innumerable company of heaven, not just as part of our small congregation. This is what we celebrate on this Sunday of All Saints.

When I was in London back in May I visited Westminster Abbey and saw the ten statues of 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs that were unveiled in 1998 to fill the empty niches above the West Door there. One of those depicted, Oscar Romero, was born in a small village in El Salvador in 1917. He was ordained as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church and worked as a quiet and unassuming pastor. At the age of sixty he was chosen to be Archbishop of San Salvador. At a time of political and social turmoil he was seen as a safe appointment. But soon the Archbishop was speaking out against the violence which was endemic in his country and in support of the demands of the poor for economic and social justice. He refused to be silenced and, with great courage, continued with his message even when his life was threatened. On 24 March in 1980, having been Archbishop for only three years he was assassinated while saying Mass.

Ever since Oscar Romero has been regarded as a martyr for his faith and after a miracle was attributed to him he was canonized by Pope Francis in 2018. So he is one of our most recent Saints and which of us would not admire the compassion and courage of this man who laid down his life in trying to help the people he had been chosen to serve?

What I find particularly fascinating about Romero's story is that for around forty years he ministered quietly without attracting much attention at all. Under other circumstances he might have stayed in his parish and died in old aged as a much loved priest. It seems that circumstances play as much a part in making saints as in making heroes. Many of us may never know if we are really brave at heart, or how we would react in a terrible crisis. Perhaps we are saints or heroes whose time will never come? But I think there is more to it than that.

Oscar Romero is remembered because of what he did in the last three years of his life, or you might even say because of what the gunman did in the last minute of his life. So, what about his ministry over the past 40 or so years, was that not also of value? I'm sure it was. And perhaps those years of faithful, ordinary service have as much to teach us as the courageous stand he made in his final years.

I sometimes wonder how the saints would have done when faced with the humdrum and tedious problems that we often face; illness or disability or disagreements with family, friends or colleagues. I suspect that many of the saints would have made lousy parents or partners or colleagues in the office, perhaps that's why they became saints!

Yet it is in these everyday ways that most of us live out our Christian faith. Most Christians exercise their faith in their family circles, places of work and local communities, doing their best to love and to forgive in their daily situations. And for us in church the challenge is to keep our community of faith alive and healthy, and outward-looking not in the face of great persecution, but rather in the face of considerable apathy and indifference towards the things of God.

The celebration of All Saints grew from a desire to remember those Christians whose names and dates had not been recorded. All Saints Day was set aside to celebrate the great company of those who had witnessed to the resurrection of Jesus Christ during their lives and sometimes by their deaths and it still reminds us of the faithful Christians who led us to faith and still surround us with their prayers.

When Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of his tomb those watching must have been transfixed. What would happen? Could this man Jesus really raise the dead? We know in retrospect that Jesus was not only teaching them about his own forthcoming death and resurrection, but also showing them the power of God to make all things new. We easily fall into thinking that things can never change; that

we can never change. But Jesus wants us to know that God has the power to renew our life even when all life appears to have gone. This is a story of divine hope and on this celebration of All Saints I pray that we will take hope from our knowledge of God's loving purpose for us in this world and of his desire for us to share eternal life with all his saints in heaven.