HOMILY FOR WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17TH, 2026 – MATTHEW 18: 1 - 9

Many of you will remember 50 years or so ago when Liberation Theology came into great prominence in the church, particularly in Latin America, a region where authoritarian right-wing regimes supported by the Roman Catholic Church had worked to keep the populace submissive to authority and to a minority of wealthy landowners. The regimes were motivated by holding on to power; the Roman Catholic Church was motivated by a fear of anything that smacked of communism or even socialism and by a theology more focused on preparing for the next world than bringing justice to this one.

Much changed starting in 1971 with the publication of A Theology of Liberation by Gustavo Gutiérrez a Dominican Priest from Peru. Leonardo Boff a Franciscan from Brazil, and Jon Sobrino a Jesuit from El Salvador all advanced a theology of liberation of the poor from oppression which was picked up by many parish priests. Liberation was taken up by many in the church. most notably Saint Oscar Romero, the late Archbishop of San Salvador who was gunned down while celebrating mass in 1980.

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel is but one of the scriptural underpinnings of Liberation Theology. *Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me*. Jesus uses a child as the example of those who should be the greatest in contrast to the disciples vying for favour and status. In 1st century Palestine, children were property, they had no intrinsic rights, and no control over their lives. They were continually vulnerable to disease and hunger.

Some 7 chapters later in Matthew 25, Jesus takes up the same point in a manner with which we are even more familiar. *Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'* Jesus goes on to flip the statement to '*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, et cetera ….* "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Our passage this evening goes on to make another important point. Immediately after saying, *Who ever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,* the passage goes on to say that if one

places a stumbling block before one of the little ones; i.e. prevents the little ones from coming to know God, and here Jesus employs hyperbole, it would be better for the person to have a great millstone around the neck and be cast into the depths of the sea. He goes on to say that if any part of one's body causes one to stumble, one should cut it off or tear it out better to be maimed in life that cast into the hell of fire.

Jesus' language about the child and the little ones is a metaphor not just for those who are young, but also for those without power, money, and status – they are the little ones. Jesus lived in a world where the lesser constantly had to appease the greater or life would become impossible. In both our passage this evening and the later passage from Chapter 25, Jesus is overthrowing the entire paradigm – *So the last will be first, and the first will be last*. (Matthew 20:16). In the Kingdom of God, the value systems of the world—which prioritize wealth, early advantage, or status are completely reversed. It was that message that truly motivated those who embraced Liberation Theology.

So what happened to Liberation Theology? It is certainly not dead, but it has been very significantly repressed. During his long reign from 1978 to 2005 Pope John Paul the Second, fresh from struggling against atheist communism in Poland for much of his life and ministry, censured Liberation theologians most notably Gutiérrez and Boff, replaced progressive bishops with conservatives, and prohibited political involvement for anyone with a ministry in the church. What has been the result? Since 1980 the percentage of the population in Brazil and Chile, for example, identifying as Roman Catholic has dropped from over 90% to 46%. In Mexico the drop is from over 90% to 67%. Like North America, across Latin America the number of people identifying as having no religion has risen greatly. Pentecostalism has also grown significantly in Latin America. Along with the rise of Pentecostalism, a significant number of Protestants in Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Venezuela, according to the Pew Research Centre ascribe to the abomination called the Prosperity Gospel – the belief that my material well being is a sign of God's favour towards me; the richer I am, the greater I enjoy God's favour. Do not imagine I am suggesting that the decline in number of Roman Catholics is directly a consequence of a rejection of Liberation Theology, but I do think it is a factor. As Anglicans we straddle a large spectrum of Christian practice and belief from pre-Vatican 2 Roman Catholicism to Evangelical worship. But our church regardless of the nature of its worship believes that societies, not just people need to be saved. We need not apologize for our material wealth, but we may well need to apologize and repent for what we do with it, and then use it differently. *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. So the last will be first and the first will be last. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who members of my family, you did it to me.* Amen