***The Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed…. Is 61:1***

I want to tell you about two people who have recently helped me to remember the joy and the seriousness of the vocation to ordination.

The first is Sheila Cassidy who was a doctor based at St Luke’s Hospice, in Plymouth, when I as a curate there, many years ago. She was born in England and grew up in Australia. She spoke to our hearts because she had experienced radical injustice in Chile, where she was tortured for giving medial treatment to a revolutionary who was protesting against institutional violence. Her personal experience of being poor in a way resonated with our own circumstances.

Sheila Cassidy’s book, *Good Friday People*, reminded me of the excitement of the early years of ordination. The multiple challenges of deprivation in inner-city Plymouth were so often illuminated by reference to a wider Christian engagement, in which the Catholic Church confronted the abuse of political power in Latin America.

In this Year of the Old Testament I also recall how the reading from Isaiah, echoed by Jesus in the gospel, held enormous significance for us. It was woven into every aspect of our pastoral, social, political and sacramental life as Christians. The example of martyrdom in one part of the Church inspired and sustained a different expression of the same endurance and witness in the parish where I sought to serve as a curate.

Cassidy described Jesuits who gave hope to dispossessed communities by reading the scriptures with them. As one Salvadoran woman put it: ‘The poorest of us feel humiliated in a situation where we can’t even think about freedom or reach it. And that’s why Jesus brings us good news about a change.’

Cassidy also told us that her friends, Jane, Ita, Carla and Jean were church workers who were raped and murdered. These were women who lived by their conviction of faith in ‘The Lord of the impossible’ and who followed him heroically, even to death. She described how people were sustained by the bravery of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was martyred on 24 March, 1980 while celebrating the Eucharist in the little chapel of the hospital where he lived.

The gospel reading on that day was one that many of us will have proclaimed recently: ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.’ The Archbishop was shot while preaching the homily. These were his final words about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist: ‘May this body immolated and this blood sacrificed for humans nourish us also, so that we may give our body and blood to suffering and to pain – like Christ, not for self, but to teach justice and peace to our people.’

Sheila Cassidy rather beautifully draws the martyrdom of St Oscar Romero back to these shores, with references to St Thomas Becket and T S Eliot’s play *Murder in the Cathedral*, where immersion in the unconditional love that God has for each of his children makes the martyr a subversive person, someone who has seen life beyond the confines of our limited existence and found a greater, richer, freer way to live.

The second person I want to tell you about is a young man who recently addressed a gathering in the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. He is Ukrainian, studying for his A levels here. And he said this: ‘I never expected to say, “I am a refugee.”’

He went on to describe the decision to leave friends and the familiarity of the only life he’d ever known. He described the trauma of a journey to an unknown destination, the need to master an unfamiliar language and the hopes that he holds for his future. ‘I am going to be an engineer, and one day I will return to my home,’ he said, as he thanked us for making him welcome in a foreign land. He drew applause and tears from his audience.

Exile and an unknown future are at the heart of our identity as Christians. After our disobedient rebellion against God we leave behind the garden of Eden, and the way to the tree of life is guarded from us by seraphim wielding fiery swords. We join the Exodus of the children of Israel who are the model for our pilgrimage through this vale of tears and death, and we confront the experience of bringing about exile in a Babylon of our own making, a deeper alienation from God and discovery that we do not know how to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews declares that ‘here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.’ Like the exile and refugee of our own time, our Christian identity resides in having the courage to say, ‘I am a refugee. My true home is the heavenly Jerusalem, where God is. My instincts and my greatest sense of security are drawn from what I know of life in that kingdom.’

As ordained ministers of the new Covenant, it is our task to nurture the instinct for life in that kingdom. This is why we should be confident about describing our churches as gymnasia of the Christian imagination, and ourselves as the guardians and animators of the eternal realities disclosed within those buildings. They are sacred places where we rehearse the practice of life in the presence of God and the emblems of its life, in word and sacrament, are given to us on trust.

This year, as we prepare to celebrate the coronation of King Charles, the sacred emblems that are given to him by the Church speak to us of this bold claim: that in the struggles of our exile on earth we are duty bound so to shape our common life that it can be seen to reveal the contours of the kingdom of heaven.

The royal sceptres of mercy and truth are symbols of the virtues needed for this; the universal kingship of Christ is represented by the orb surmounted by the cross; the crown is given by the Church to the earthly monarch as the symbol of accountability to the only ‘ruler of rulers’, God himself, and it is worn in acknowledgement of judgement entrusted by the Father to Jesus Christ, who established this kingdom when he was crowned with thorns and enthroned upon the cross for our sake.

Sheila Cassidy’s *Good Friday People* and the young Ukrainian come back to mind. For it is the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake who will inherit this kingdom. It is the refugee and those who have been dehumanised by hatred and greed who are most likely to recognise the workings of divine love, which subverts the economics of attainment and control because laughter, love, and the intelligence of the human conscience are irreducible signs of the divine freedom at work in us.

At ordination to the priesthood, you were anointed to serve the poor and the exile with that same oil of Chrism that makes a mortal being into an earthly monarch. Together, we are accountable to God for the people we serve.

In seeking to equip and sustain you in this ministry, I also wish to thank you, on behalf of your congregations and local communities, for the cost you gladly pay to accomplish what you have been called and anointed to do and[‘-[‘ to be. Empowered by grace, you continue to make life qualitatively different in a culture that has does so much to suffocate the spirit and extinguish the glory of the living God.

So, as exiles who prepare to celebrate Easter and the eternal hope that is in us, let the final word of this homily be an echo from the liturgy of our early centuries, in which Christ declares: ‘I am the life of the dead. Arise…you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person…. The cherubim throne has been prepared, the bearers are ready and waiting, the bridal chamber is in order…the kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you since before the ages began.’