

ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO MASS

24 March 2010

Oscar Romero was Archbishop of San Salvador from February 1977 until 24 March 1980. Today we come to pray, on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, in thanksgiving for the witness he gave during those three years of his episcopacy and for the people of El Salvador. In doing so we keep in mind all who are deprived of basic needs, especially of a place to live and of a chance for education.

The memory of Archbishop Romero, whose funeral was attended by over 200,000 people, will be treasured today in many parts of the world, but with especial devotion and gratitude in El Salvador. There, thankfully, so many things have changed so that today the man shot to death by the authorities is now recognised by all as a champion of truth and as an heroic voice for the poor.

The situation was not so peaceful when, in my turn, I went to El Salvador in February 1985. I have never forgotten the days we spent there, my visit to the tomb of Archbishop Romero in the still incomplete cathedral, standing in the midst of a chaotic city as a sign of the strength and defiance of the Church in the face of repression and violence. During that visit we met with so many people: the missionary priests from abroad, including the now famous Jesuits, some of the local diocesan priests, the Vicar General, Bishop y Damas, the British Ambassador and many local people.

A number of things were clear. At that time, everything was politicised, everything seen in ideological terms. There was no middle ground. Then, secondly, it was clear that violence and threat were everywhere. One diocesan priest told me that if he so much had a bidding prayer for the refugees, encamped in the grounds of the seminary next to his church, then his sister and her family would be threatened or killed.

A third memory stays in my mind: in that small country, not much bigger than Wales, there were thousands and thousands of refugees, people forced off their land and living with next to nothing, and no security at all.

We are now familiar with the heroic stand taken by Archbishop Romero. He was determined to follow a clear path. Week by week, in a way that riveted attention, he spoke the truth of how things were. He named all those who, in the course of the week, had been murdered by agents of the government. He made sure that they were not forgotten, nor discarded as worthless as their killers wanted. He worked to alleviate the suffering of the poorest, making resources available, using his time to be with them. He worked to improve their prospects, encouraging the church congregations to see that the Gospel has to be lived in action, actions aimed at the integral human development, of which we speak today.

This was his programme, a programme he followed with courage in the extreme and difficult circumstances which were the fruit of systematic exploitation and which led, a short time after his death, to the outbreak of a twelve year long civil war. This was a brave path which drew both criticism and support. Today we are proud to recall the unequivocal support given to Archbishop Romero by our own Cardinal Hume. As early as June 1977, the Cardinal wrote to the Archbishop expressing his deepest concern about the events he faced in El Salvador. He wrote:

‘Many reports have reached me of the increasing tensions and violence since the elections. I have been saddened by the widespread repression of peasant farmers and by the killing of the Foreign Minister. However I am especially concerned at the violent attacks on the Church in El Salvador which have culminated in the murders of Fr Rutillio Grande and Fr Alfonso Navarro. It is depressing that their only ‘crime’, like other priests who have been tortured or expelled, was that they preached the Gospel message of social justice to the poor. The stand that you personally have taken, supported by your fellow bishops, is an inspiration to the Church throughout the world.’

At the heart of that stand was Oscar Romero's repudiation of violence. And it was his brave direct appeal to members of the army and the police to refuse orders to kill which, as we know, provoked his own murder on 24 March 1980 in the chapel of the Hospital of Divine Providence while actually celebrating Mass.

Today we join with so many people in thanking God for this outstanding bishop who sought to be faithful to his calling, the calling and promise of every bishop, to make the care of the poor his special concern. In his final homily, Archbishop Romero said:

'Those who surrender to the service of the poor through love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies....The harvest comes because of the grain that dies...We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us.' And he was not afraid to pay the price.

Today, as we give thanks to God for this remarkable witness, what do we learn for ourselves? Our circumstances in this country are not cast in such extreme conflicts. We are thankful for our tradition of democratic politics and the rule of law by which we handle the exercise of power. Yet there are many places in the world where this is not so and we keep in our prayers all who suffer through the misuse of power and the domination of heartless and oppressive self-interest. Indeed we are committed, through actions which reflect our Gospel commitment, to bring assistance to the huge number of poor and deprived people in the world, working in partnerships with many others of good will.

But here, in our circumstances, what do we learn? Perhaps most of all we can be inspired by Oscar Romero's courage to speak the truth of the human reality that is before our eyes. This is a fundamental commitment in service of the Gospel. But it is always costly. We know how easily events are manipulated, how 'facts' are distorted to fit a predetermined narrative, often one that is fashioned to serve another purpose, whether of a political or an economic nature.

We know how, in the Church too, we can be tempted to hide distressing failure and we can recognise the cost of doing so. Yet the first step towards a freedom of action is the courage to name and acknowledge the truth, whether that is true effects of the financial crisis, the truth of the failures in the care of the vulnerable elderly, the real effects of sexual permissiveness, or the real impact of social breakdown and of poverty in this country. Then the inspiration of the Gospel will produce in us the desire to act in the service of this truth and in support of those most in need.

In all of this we must take care, as Oscar Romero did, that our words and actions, expressed in the name of the Church, do not spring from any political ideology but from a commitment to the dignity of every person and from a commitment to the common good, a good which excludes no-one from its embrace. This was the framework of his thought. And these are the perspectives which we are to bring to our own forthcoming election and which we bishops have expressed in our document ‘Choosing the Common Good’.

Oscar Romero was a preacher of astonishing clarity and power. As we recall his life and his death, let us listen again to his words. These are words addressed to us as we travel through these last days of Lent. These are words that he would wish us to take to heart for they spring from the depth of his own spiritual journey, one which all of us must travel. They were spoken on the 23 March 1980, the day before he was killed:

‘How easy it is to denounce structural injustice, institutionalised violence, social sin! And it is true, this sin is everywhere, but where are the roots of this social sin? In the heart of every human being. Present-day society is a sort of anonymous world in which no one is willing to admit guilt, and everyone is responsible. We are all sinners, and we have all contributed to this massive crime and violence in our country. Salvation begins with the human person, with human dignity, with saving every person from sin. And in this Lent this is God’s call: Be converted!’

Amen, indeed, amen to that.

May the life and words of this holy bishop inspire us all on our journey of conversion and in joyous service of the Lord.

‘God our Father, you blessed your servant Oscar Romero with a love for the poor and a passion for justice. United with Jesus your Son, he gave his life at the altar in love for your people. Pour your Holy Spirit upon your Church. Grant that we too may recognise and serve Jesus in those most in need, and bring your love and compassion, your peace and justice to our world. Amen.’

+Vincent Nichols
24 March 2010