

ARCHBISHOP ROMERO 29th ANNIVERSARY LITURGY

‘From Cross to Resurrection’

St Martin-in-the Fields, 28 March, 2009

[The readings of the day were were *Jeremiah* 11: 18-20 & *John* 7: 40-52)

This anniversary has become an annual event that shows no sign of losing impetus. The former ‘Anniversary Mass’ has become an ecumenical liturgy generously hosted by St Martins. You may remember that the same generous spirit led the authorities of Westminster Abbey to represent twentieth-century martyrs ecumenically, by way of ten statues. Besides Anglican martyrs there were Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Roman Catholics. Oscar Romero is among these martyrs. The erection of his statue had a sequel. Clare Dixon (of CAFOD and the Archbishop Romero Trust) and I once took to El Salvador a replica, 1 metre high, of that Westminster Abbey statue. At San Salvador airport, we were a little apprehensive. The parcel was of a distinctly odd shape that would not go unnoticed, and we assumed that Romero would rouse mixed emotions in state officials. But the statue was waved respectfully, even ceremoniously, through customs.

It’s evident that Oscar Romero speaks far beyond his own tense situation. His life and death touch our lives in this city and in this year. His anniversary has been marked in York and in Edinburgh as well as here in London - and in many other countries. The fact that his witness has so deeply touched the Church of England was, in turn, a powerful evangelical sign for the Church and people of El Salvador. Today, I want to reflect on this integration of historic specificity with universal relevance.

To remember historical injustices and atrocities often provokes resentment. Some will claim that ‘there is nothing to be gained from raking over the past’, or (in ecclesiastical blocking language) that acts of public memory are ‘not opportune’. But some who discourage acts of remembrance have much to gain from suppressing the record of victims, in order to keep unchallenged a distorted version of the past. The purpose of ‘remembering’ Romero is not to use him as a weapon against others, or to become expert in the history of El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s, but so that his faithfulness in his own context may animate us to live better our own lives and responsibilities.

We can take the famous myth (to use the word positively) of the moment of ‘conversion’ when Romero understands that the endemic violence of the state will determine his own ministry - as it would determine his own fate. His close friend Rutilio Grande SJ (who was master of ceremonies at Romero’s episcopal ordination) was assassinated in March 1977, after Romero had been Archbishop for only a few weeks. How could he **not** be shaken? Two months later, the death squads killed another priest, Alfonso Navarro. Now bishops will often, and very reasonably, say that their priests are their pre-eminent pastoral concern. But of course it was lay people and the poor who bore the terrible brunt of the army’s brutality. It is vital, therefore, that Romero was close enough to the people (so many photos of him show this closeness) to allow **their experience** to shape his. And it is not easy for a bishop to stay close to the people in this way.

He may have first thought that his eminent position would keep him immune from physical attack. His last speeches show that he knew better. This from 1980: 'If God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my death be for the freedom of my people ... A bishop will die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish.'

In these final months of his life he became more and more direct. I remind you of perhaps the most famous quotation of all in which, the day before his death, he directly addressed the military:

'In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to Heaven, each day more tumultuously, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!'

I find myself imagining that it is these words, and especially that third verb, that get him killed. I **order** you . . .'. An archbishop may beg, may 'beseech'. But it is only the military who give 'orders' to the military. The attempt, even by an archbishop, to usurp this 'right' means death. 'Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, to God what belongs to God' (*Matt 22: 21*). As I heard Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin say, recently, this counsel becomes most urgent when the Caesars actually begin to think they are God.

Our readings today show how this heroic faithfulness is rooted in the prophetic tradition. At this point in *Jeremiah* the prophet still shows a certain naiveté: he cannot imagine that it is against **him** that plots are being laid. A few chapters later, he knows better: 'I hear many whispering, "Denounce him!" . . . All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.' (20: 10)

Romero was far more aware than was Jeremiah of who were his enemies in the state, the army - and in the Church. A bishop of the next generation, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, later recalled that one of his bishop colleagues grotesquely accused Romero in front of John Paul II, during the Pope's visit to El Salvador in 1996, of having been responsible for the death of 70,000 Salvadoreños. In his own lifetime the bishops conference was deeply divided. Romero refused to be deflected. In his first year as Archbishop he already interprets intense personal opposition in terms of the prophetic dimension of the Gospel:

'Do you want to know if your Christianity is genuine? Here is the touchstone: Whom do you get along with? Who are those who criticise you? who are those who do not accept you? Who are those who flatter you?' (Sermon of November 1977)

This reads as the self-questioning of a church leader who already realises that what many people expect from him is a special abstract pious language that will use ultimate 'religious' truth to mask urgent **immediate** truths: a language that will, in this way, gratify the powerful who wish to think of themselves, however ruthless, as religious. But he would never allow brutality to be legitimated by 'principle': as he said, 'anti-Communism is very often the weapon the economic and political forces use to perpetuate their social and political injustices'.

In *John 7*, from which our Gospel reading is taken, Jesus has already challenged the Jewish leaders, 'Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?' (v.19). Like the bishops of El Salvador, perhaps, the leaders are split. Some want to arrest him, but no one lays hands on him. The ground still has to be prepared, but the outcome is not in doubt. As James Alison points out in the reflection that we have just heard, Nicodemus is mocked (not reasoned with) for insisting on due process. But

perhaps it is even more astonishing that the **temple guards themselves** say, 'No one ever spoke like him'. Today in London is a day of demonstrations. Have you ever seen the police at a demonstration persuaded by the speakers' arguments? But even the on-duty police are more open than this 'National Security State of the Spirit'.

I began by stating the obvious, we remember Oscar Romero **today**, so that we bring our own perspective to this memorial. In his Romero Lecture last month, Dean Brackley recalled the specific situation of **El Salvador** today, and we must not overlook that: to take just two statistics, 'The richest fifth of the population receives 56% of national income. More than 40% of the people live on less than \$2.00 a day, even though basic prices in El Salvador are especially high'. We will pray today for the new president Mauricio Funes, victor in the election that has finally overthrown the ARENA party that governed for so long often so brutally. But we should heed Dean Brackley's realism:

By itself a change of government will not produce liberation. Even if the FMLN candidate wins, fundamental inequalities will not change soon . . . especially in small countries so dependent on big economic powers and so intertwined in broader international economic and political relations. Capital rules, even dependent capital.

That last statement ('Capital rules, even dependent capital') brings us face to face with one inescapable challenge. Today, under the banner *Put People First – March for Jobs, Justice and Climate*, more than 100 organisations will demand that the G20 meeting of April 2nd will respond to the global crisis not by devising some supposed technical fix, but in a way that is humanly adequate. The march will pass through Trafalgar Sq. about the time that this service finishes.

A Church of England Colleague, Canon John Nurser, visited me recently in Brussels and later sent me an eloquent email. Eloquent **emails** are so rare as to deserve quoting, in three points:

1. our present crisis is not of a kind that can be met by single-issue NGOs . . . Climate, banking, globalisation, poverty, development, global 'fairness', economic regulation are all bound in with each other.
2. this crisis is impossible to resolve quickly . . . It requires long-term and local education and advocacy within a global framework, on the basis of a moral solidarity that contains the possibility of a national action against its own material interest.
3. I see little chance of that happening except in the context of the Christian churches.

To identify that contribution of the churches is my final point. They bring two essential attributes.

First: at best, a march such as today's is not a futile gesture but is a kind of sacrament. It does not merely demand that **other people** act as we wish, but expresses the marchers' own commitment to stay faithful to those who will suffer most in this crisis. The G20 ministers should know that the people care. The welfare of this **global** people needs to be in our heart as the people of El Salvador inspired the passion (in both senses) of Oscar Romero. Now the churches bring a lived experience of a community that is global without being abstract. Whether we travel to them or they to us, we **know** people from many cultures, share faith and (we hope) life with them. Only that experience is adequate to meet a global crisis that threatens to divide peoples from each other even more starkly than before.

Secondly the churches are not instinctively effective public campaigners. But they can bring an irreplaceable vision, and one that campaigners may often lack. In Brazil recently, I heard a theologian argue that the question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' is typically the question posed to Jesus by the privileged or prosperous insider, such as the rich man of *Mark* 10, or the doctor of the Law of *Luke* 10. Jesus responds quite toughly to these two questioners, since he refuses to endorse any conception of 'eternal life' as an added extra to the secure possession of all the goods of **this life**. But the question of the poor, that draws his full response is the appeal for the basic goods of **this life**: it may be a leper (*Mark* 1) , or Bartimaeus (*Mark* 10) or the Syro-Phoenician woman (*Mark* 7) . To these people Jesus grants what they ask. However, cumulatively this giving of the basic goods of life here and now becomes the powerful sign of that life that **is** eternal, a life which is totally gift, lived by the power of the one who, according to *Ephesians* 3, 'can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine'. So, Romero imagines that the prophets have a message greater than they knew: and we can include him among them. He wrote

One day prophets will sing
not only the return from Babylon
but our full liberation.

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.
They walk in lands of shadows,
but a light has shone forth." (*Isaiah* 9:1–2)

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March 28, 2009