

Forty-first Anniversary of the Martyrdom of St Oscar Romero

The Archbishop
Romero Trust

Archbishop John Wilson

Homily given on 27 March 2021, St George's Cathedral, Southwark.

Dear Friends

Back in February 2011, I was privileged to visit two priests from the Diocese of Leeds working in Peru. One served a parish in Carabayllo, on the far outskirts of Lima, just off the main highway. I stayed with him for a week and, out one day for an early morning walk, I saw a young woman stood beside the road with a sack of empty drinks cans. She was running back and forth, in between the traffic, putting the cans in the pathway of oncoming vehicles. Once flattened, she dashed to retrieve them so they could be sold for recycling. With each can, she risked her life, for pennies. I looked on, horrified. I then noticed a plinth in the central reservation, with a bust of Monseñor Romero. He too, as it were, looked on.

But here's a defining truth about St Óscar Romero, assassinated 41 years ago last Wednesday. He did not merely look on at poverty. He was not just a bystander in the face of injustice. His heart burned with righteousness. He spoke and he acted. Before he was ever martyred or canonised, he lived as a saint and preached like a prophet.

It is impossible to remember St Óscar without thinking simultaneously of his impassioned stance for justice; of his courageous defence of human rights; of his relentless advocacy for the poor; of his damning critique of oppression and violence. He did all this because he belonged to Christ. He did this because he believed the Gospel. He knew that what was happening before his eyes, to the weakest and the poorest, was happening to Christ and to His body, the Church. As Christ crucified shared our sufferings, so St Óscar entered into the suffering of his people. He could not, and would not, simply look on. Here was a shepherd who not only smelled of his sheep, but who shed his blood with them and for them, as he celebrated Holy Mass in the person of Christ.

Both during and after his lifetime, St Óscar's beloved homeland was scarred by brutal conflict. Around 75,000 civilians were killed in the civil war, and others in the years leading up to it. Death squads murdered priests, religious, and lay people. Among so many innocent victims, the names of Fr Rutillio Grande, Manuel Solorzano, Nelson Lemus, Sr Maura Clarke,

Sr Ita Ford, Sr Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan, and those massacred at the Central American University, all shape the Salvadorian martyrology.

In terrible years of darkness and turmoil, faith remained an anchor. In fact, it remained the anchor. In St Oscar's words, *'Christianity's only true absolute [is] God and his Christ.'*ⁱ In changing times he preached a changeless truth: God in Christ is with us, *'a pilgrim accompanying us throughout history.'*ⁱⁱ

This unchanging certainty came alive slowly for the two Emmaus-bound disciples. With their hope destroyed, and their confidence undermined, they fled, downcast, away from Jerusalem. But the risen Lord Jesus turned their getaway into a pilgrimage. First, He accompanied them in their sorrow, walking with them in solidarity. He then listened to their story, making sense of it through the Scriptures. Finally, He showed Himself to them in the Eucharistic breaking of bread. These previously downtrodden escapees were transformed into evangelists. Their hearts were lifted and set ablaze. Sent out as witnesses, their story is our story as, we too, encounter and announce Christ on the way.

For St Óscar the parallels were real. Our greatest need is for hope that does not deceive us. This hope has a name. Of course, we should work for a better world; but human fulfilment will never come about through worldly liberation. *'There is no liberation,'* preached St Óscar, *'without the cross. There are no true liberators without hope in another life.'*ⁱⁱⁱ Hope in another life is hope in Christ and life in the Spirit. Victory over death, forgiveness of sins, the commandment to love and live the Gospel of justice, all this, and more, gives purpose and meaning to our history. What the Lord Jesus did for the Emmaus disciples, St Óscar mirrored towards the marginalised and dispossessed. The call to Christian love has no expiry date or exclusions. We must be Christ to whomever we meet on the road. We must journey together as pilgrims.

Faced with a pandemic of injustice, a pandemic of poverty, a pandemic of violence, St Óscar Romero was not indifferent. Christ directed his response. The Gospel was his roadmap. He accompanied and he listened. He unpacked the Scriptures and gathered people around the altar. Faith in the risen Christ gave him strength to stand firm, to preach conversion here and now. Conversion to peace and reconciliation. Conversion to respect for human life and dignity. Conversion to sharing fairly the earth's resources. Conversion to genuine freedom as children of God. Minutes before he was shot, St Óscar declared: *'We know that every effort to improve society, especially when injustice and sin are so widespread, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God requires of us.'*^{iv} In the service of God's kingdom, in the

sometimes daunting search for truth, holiness, grace, justice, love and peace, God commands that we speak and act, not just look on in passive silence.

I wondered what St Óscar might say to us as we plan recovery from our own experience of pandemic? Undoubtedly, he would call us more deeply into relationship with Christ through the Church. He would call us back to the sacraments and the life of faith. But, perhaps, he might also offer us three straightforward encouragements. The first, not to seek supposed progress at the expense of anyone else. The second, to walk forward in virtuous solidarity with as many people as possible, especially those on the margins. The third, that each of us ask ourselves what we can give, what we can do, and what we can say, to make a difference to those most in need.

What astonishes and inspires me about this incredible saint of the twentieth century Church is how totally open he was to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, to overcoming his personal insecurities, to preaching the word of life so powerfully that it cost him not less than everything. Endurance in Christ, endurance through and with Christ, enabled St Óscar Romero to know and do God's will. May his example and heavenly intercession grant us something of the same.

✠ John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark

ⁱ Homily, 18 September 1977

ⁱⁱ Homily, 18 March 1979

ⁱⁱⁱ Homily, 16 April 1978

^{iv} Homily, 24 March 1980