

The Hour of Jesus: Our Hour

Edgardo Colón-Emeric

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Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. For a Methodist minister like myself, this feels like a homecoming, a return to the rock from which I was hewn, to quote the prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 51:1). Unfortunately, the challenging conditions under which we are currently living do not allow me to be with you in person. But I am grateful that through the wonders of modern technology I can be with you remotely, we can be brought together as a community.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, our journey towards Holy Week meets with an historical event, the 40th anniversary of Óscar Romero's martyrdom. On March 24, 1980, Romero was assassinated at the altar of a hospital chapel. He had just finished preaching from John 12: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." That afternoon he became the grain of wheat; he fell; he died; he bore much fruit. One of these fruits was his practice of reading of the signs of the times through the Lord of history, Jesus Christ. In today's gospel lesson, we hear Jesus say that his hour has come. This morning with Romero's help, I invite us to consider the hour of Jesus as our hour, an hour of lament, hope, and witness.

The hour of Jesus is our hour of lament. In Psalm 130, we hear what the Bible calls a song of ascent. It is the song of a pilgrim for whom the prospect of holy days in the holy city brings no joy or security but pain and sorrow. It is a song written for our hour. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!" We are familiar with this voice. This is the voice of the infected patient told to wait for treatment, the voice of the furloughed worker drowning in debt, the voice of the one whose future looked bright a few weeks ago but is now sinking in the mire where there is no foothold (cf. Ps 69:2). It is our hour of lament.

Jesus understands the hour of lament. "My soul is troubled," he says. However, he does not ask to be saved from this hour; he came into the world for this hour, for our hour of lament. Romero learned from Jesus that this

hour is a strange gift. Lament helps us see and name the truth about this world and about God. During his time as archbishop Romero lived at a hospice for people dying from cancer. He frequently invited people to visit the centre, to lament alongside the sick and the dying, to experience that truth for themselves. It was both home and Gethsemane, a lonely place where he encountered God in the bodies of his suffering neighbours. All his homilies were prepared at this little hospital. It was there that his final homily was preached. It was there that he learned to wait for the Lord. This leads me to my second point. We are not left in the hour of lament, we are not left waiting, but through our waiting we come to the hour of hope.

The hour of Jesus is our hour of hope. In the gospel reading, we hear that the hour of the cross is also the hour of glory. Like the grain of wheat, Jesus will die, but he will bear fruit. He is exalted by falling. He hopes to lose because what history calls failure he calls doing his Father's will. Jesus redefines hope. Hope in difficult times does not grow by downplaying the seriousness of the situation. Hope is not optimism; it is not found by looking at the bright side. Hope is found in God, for with him is great power to redeem.

In his final homily, moments before the fatal bullet was fired, Romero spoke of hope. He preached of the final hopes Christians hold in their hearts: the resurrection of the dead, the kingdom of God, the harvest of justice and peace awaiting God's people, the transfiguration of all things in Christ. He also preached of more immediate hopes: an equitable society for all starting with the poor, an end to the state of emergency, a peaceful resolution to the political polarization. He believed that heavenly hopes strengthen and purify historical hopes. The good seeds that we plant on earth can sprout here and blossom in heaven. What matters is not the size of the seed but God.

Sara Meardi de Pinto, the woman Romero was eulogizing on March 24, 1980, was an ordinary person. She was not on the frontline of the struggle for justice, her health did not allow it, but she too made a positive contribution during the time of national crisis: her understanding presence, an encouraging word, and above all her prayers, the great interpreter of hope. Our hour of hope is our hour of prayer. Prayer can turn a kitchen into an altar, a quarantine into a Lenten pilgrimage, a hospital room into an Upper Room, and an ordinary person into a witness. This leads me to my final thought on our present hour, we are called to bear witness.

The hour of Jesus is our hour of witness. In the gospel reading, when Jesus learns that some Greeks were looking for him, he knows that his hour has come, the hour when he will draw all peoples to himself. The hour of his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is the hour of his manifestation to humanity. The inscription on the cross, written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, is only the beginning. All nations will look for him and they will find him through his servants, through witnesses like Philip, Andrew, and Romero.

During his time as archbishop, Romero's homilies were broadcast on the radio. It is said that on a Sunday morning you could walk the streets of any town in El Salvador without missing a word of his sermons because every home radio was tuned in to the live broadcast. One word sums up the content of his preaching, the truth. On one occasion, an airport employee unloading the archbishop's bag from the plane was overheard saying: "There goes the truth." It is because he preached the truth of the national crisis that people flocked to the cathedral in unheard of numbers and enthusiastically listened to sermons pushing the two-hour mark.

It is because he preached the truth of God's love for the outcast that those in power considered his preaching a threat. They jammed the radio signal, blew up transmission towers, and murdered him. Romero knew this was coming. He said, "All who preach Christ are voice, but the voice passes away, preachers die...only the Word remains."

The hour of Jesus is our hour of witness. The Word who is Christ remains in the voice of his witnesses. It sounds like the voice of the nurse who risks infection and burnout for the sake of caring for the sick. It sounds like the voice of a young person risking loneliness and depression for the sake of protecting others from becoming sick. It sounds like the voice of Romero saying, "God's best microphone is Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the church, and all of you are the church."

The hour of Jesus is our hour of lament, hope, and witness. The world has COVID-19, but the church is not closed for business. God's best microphone, Christ, is still speaking. And Christ's best microphone, you, the church is still transmitting.