

*He Heard Their Voice: Archbishop Romero – Mystic and Prophet, Brian Pierce OP*

*Brian Pierce OP was the guest speaker for Romero Week 2015. Here is the essence of his reflections.*

I'd like to begin with a story told by a young man who had entered the seminary at the time when Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador.

*"I was asked one day to sweep and clean and mop the entire seminary building. As I went by the chapel on the top floor I saw that at that early hour of the morning there was a priest praying in one of the front pews. He was all alone, kneeling. I kept going down the hall, and after a while I had practically polished the whole floor. He was still there praying. The fool didn't even move. I went down another hall and got it all shiny and then went back and peeked again into the chapel. There he was, still kneeling. Why so much prayer, I thought? There is so much happening in this country, and all he can think of doing is praying? He needs to learn a few things from Monseñor Romero. Now there's a man with fire in his heart and in his words, a man that doesn't waste his time. I was angry with that praying man, whoever he was. If he doesn't come out, I am going to go in and mop the chapel floor. I went in, I went up and down with my mop, getting closer and closer to that motionless lump of a man, and then I looked at him from head to toe. It was Monseñor Romero. He didn't even move. When I left the chapel, he was still there, kneeling and praying. I left with my bubble burst, and the mop over my shoulder like an empty musket."*

This is the man we know as a great prophet. But he was as great a contemplative as he was a prophet, and those two things cannot be separated in his life.

From Mark's gospel, chapter 10:

*They came to Jericho and Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho. Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me". Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more, "Son of David, have mercy on me". Jesus stood still and he said, "call him here". They called the blind man saying to him, "Take heart, get up, he is calling you". So throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus and Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said, "Teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go, your faith has made you well". Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.*

I think that the heart of this text is the very short phrase, "Jesus stood still". All the important Pharisees and scribes and religious people were huddling up next to Jesus but in all of this commotion he stops, listens and hears a human voice that is muffled and completely ignored by the world. It is that inner stillness of Jesus that allowed him to listen to the cry that no-one else paid any attention too, that no-one else cared about. How many years did Romero pray in silence every morning? But it was that stillness that enabled him to listen, to hear the cry that the world had not heard.

The life of the public Romero that we all know begins, very slowly at first, in 1974, when he is named the bishop of the diocese of Santiago de Maria. Until then Romero has pretty much been an obscure priest doing his job, working with the people, then seven years sitting at a desk, working as secretary of the bishops' conference, typing up homilies for the nuncio, things like that. Santiago de Maria is a highland area, a coffee growing region, a place that in the winter is quite cold. In the coffee season people leave the villages to pick coffee, to earn a little bit of extra money to get through the year. In the first coffee season in his new diocese a local man said to Bishop Romero, "Do you realise that the campesinos who have arrived here to work on the plantations are sleeping on the sidewalks, they are scattered in the plaza at night, they are shivering with the cold?" Romero had been pretty much oblivious to this. He lived in the bishop's house and it hadn't dawned on him that these

people were sleeping out at night in the cold. So he asks, "What can be done?" The man tells him, "Look at the big old house up there where the school used to be – why don't you open it up?" He opened it up. 300 people could fit into this house. He also decided to open an empty classroom – another 30 people could sleep there. And then he added a little maternal touch, he give them some hot atol or hot milk to drink at night when they came home from picking the coffee beans. The local man remembered that "in the evenings Romero would come up to the house and go around talking and speaking with everyone." And then adds the important words, "and he spent a lot of time listening".

Listening, like Jesus on the way back to Jerusalem from Jericho. Listening, hearing their voices.

One of the most important moments of Romero's life, as we know, was the death of Father Rutilio Grande. After he celebrated the funeral mass of Fr. Rutilio he declared that the following Sunday there would be only one mass celebrated in the entire archdiocese. The other bishops were livid. The nuncio scolded him and called him irresponsible and imprudent.

More than 100,000 people filled the plaza in front of the cathedral in San Salvador that day. Who knows how many were listening on the radio throughout the country. One of those who was there, Fr. Inocencio Alas, describes what happened.

"As the mass began I noticed that Monsenor Romero was sweating, pale, nervous, when he began the homily it seemed slow to me, without his usual eloquence, as if he was reluctant to go through the door of history that God was opening for him". He is three weeks archbishop, he has come from this small diocese, he is little known and rather bookwormish and not well supported by the priests. "You could see Romero was reluctant to take this step," says Fr Alas, "But after a few minutes I felt the Holy Spirit descend upon him. He said, I want to give public thanks today here in front of the archdiocese for the unified support that is being expressed for the gospel, and for these, our beloved priests, many of them in danger, just like Fr. Grande. When they heard the name of Rutilio, thousands exploded into applause."

"As the people were applauding him," Fr Alas went on, "it seemed as if something rose within him. It was then that Romero crossed that threshold, he went through the door". And then Alas adds this very interesting image, "You know there is baptism by water, and there is baptism by blood. But there is also baptism by the people." It's a beautiful image. I think we could say that Romero was that day baptised into the people of God. It was a very important moment in his life.

From the gospel of Luke:

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him and went away leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite passed on the other side. But a Samaritan who was travelling came near him and when he saw him he was moved with pity. He went to him, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, take care of him and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend. Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? He answered, the one who showed him mercy. Jesus said, go and do likewise.*

For us who are followers of Jesus, we are invited to remember that that body that is pushed to the edge of our world, our life, our cities, our consciences, is in some ways also Christ. And it was only the Samaritan who had the courage, the attentiveness that comes from listening, to go over and touch the body of Christ, to celebrate Eucharist on the side of the road.

Gustavo Gutierrez has said, "The question, Who is my neighbour? places the one asking the question in the centre. But Jesus turns the question upside down. He responds with another question. Who was the neighbour to the wounded person left alongside the road? The one who was assaulted and left on the side of the road is placed centre stage. This is a change from seeing the neighbour as an object, one who receives my help, to seeing the neighbour as the subject. Our neighbour is not a person we accidentally bump into along the road, but a person we actively go in search of. The person lying by the side of the road who has been left to die is calling us by name. If I want to be a disciple of Jesus, then I have to move. I have to be displaced, from my world to the world of the other. Listen to this insight of Archbishop Romero, from one of his homilies from 1978. "There is a criteria for knowing if God is near to us or far away. Whoever cares for the hungry, the naked, the poor, the disappeared, the tortured, the prisoner, anyone who suffers, for that person God is near." This is saying exactly the same thing as Gutierrez, but using different language. If I draw near to the person who is left half dead on the side of the road, then God is near to me. Jesus is the first one who crosses over to the other side of the road. Jesus is also the body lying in the road.

The incarnation becomes the model for Christian discipleship. God is poured out and becomes small and enters into the world, moving towards us in our broken humanity. So God is the first one who allows himself/herself to be displaced. As Pope Francis says, "God thinks like the Samaritan, who does not pass near the victim feeling sorry for him or for her or looking the other way, but comes to the victim's aid, without asking anything in return." God always takes the first step.

Discipleship requires movement, requires displacement. Romero is saying to us, If we go to help the wounded God, the wounded Christ, then God is near to us. Jesus doesn't skirt around our humanity to reach God. He goes right to where we are, right into our world, right into everything that is human, and in making this journey he turns to us and says, Come and follow me.

In the last couple of years of his life Romero goes deeper and deeper into the option that he has chosen, this "baptism into the people". He goes deeper and deeper into their hearts, into their lives. He puts himself on the edge of the road, where the poor live and die. One gets a sense that once Romero has gone through that door and crossed that threshold, there is no more looking back, no more wondering whether he made the right decision or not. He is not sweating his decisions anymore, he is just being with the people. It is as if the poor are giving Romero the word of God. He is no longer a great preacher who announces this good news to the poor; he becomes a beggar, he becomes a man who listens to the people's voice, listens to their stories. He becomes a poor man in a sense, the opposite of the man who learnt everything he knew from books. It's almost as if he had to forget everything that he learnt, and to go to the people and say, Touch me, Give me the word of God. Romero is saying, I read the scriptures and then I go out and I look at the people; I listen to the people and then I know what I am supposed to say. It is a whole new moment in his life.

Romero knows that this poor, broken person, these poor, crucified people, have the word of God that he needs. He crosses to the side of the road so that he can receive the word of God from them. "And if some day they take away our radio station from us" - which in the end they did, they blew it up - "if they close down our newspaper, if they don't let us speak, if they kill all the priests and the bishops too, and you are left, a people without priests, each one of you must be God's microphone. Each one of you must be a messenger, a prophet. My voice will disappear, but the word which is Christ, will remain in the hearts of those who have wanted to receive it." This is a very powerful transformation. At the end of Romero's life he has discovered that the poor are the prophets and he can only speak what they give to him to speak. He listens, listens, listens to the people and they give him the word he speaks.

*If you would like to see Fr Brian Pierce OP speaking at the Romero lecture at Blackfriars in Oxford, there is a short, 7 minute film on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmLjXYmR-so>*