

ST ALBANS CATHEDRAL: EVENSONG

Address given during Evensong at St Albans Cathedral to mark the 45th Anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero, on 23 March 2025

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Scripture texts: Romans 8.35-end; John 15.18-21

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul lists the things that people tend to fear the most: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, the nakedness of poverty and insecurity, danger and violence. He insists that none of these things can separate us from the love of Christ, but it can be hard to believe this when faced with the reality of them. It's precisely these disasters and God's apparent inability to remedy them or lack of interest in doing so that rob so many people of their childhood faith. Every day the media remind us of the cynical politics and ruthless business profiteering that ruin lives and threaten our planet's future for the benefit of a tiny few. This year, the Roman Catholic Church is inviting all Christians to celebrate a Jubilee Year as Pilgrims of Hope. How can we do so in the face of so much suffering?

St. Oscar Romero was a true pilgrim of hope. He didn't deny the harsh reality of oppressive violence, but named it for what it was, at the same time claiming that:

Hope is not simply waiting for things to get better. Hope is the certainty that Christ walks with us, that our struggle for justice and dignity is not in vain.'

He saw hope as a force enabling those threatened by oppression and death to believe that love triumphs through the power of Christ, crucified and risen. He encouraged his people:

'Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world. Let us not tire of preaching love, even when people see us as sowers of naivety and disillusionment. Love must win out; it is the only thing that can.'

Romero's kind of hope recognizes the brokenness of the world but refuses to surrender to despair. Hope, faith and love work together: Faith gives us knowledge of God's promises, hope sustains us in trusting that those promises will be fulfilled, and love is both the divine catalyst and the active human response which makes hope real in the world.

In his encyclical *Saved in Hope (Spe Salvi)*, Pope Benedict tells us that:

'The Christian message [is] not only "informative" but "performative" [...] the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing [...] The one who has hope lives differently.'

Romero saw that this 'living differently' was not only about the transformation of individuals but also about the transformation of the Church as a community. He claimed that:

'There is no dichotomy between faith and life. A true Christian does not leave their faith behind when they step out into the streets. Their faith gives them hope and calls them to transform the world.'

For members of such a Church, true Christian hope doesn't settle for an unjust world, lamenting that that's just the way things are. It insists with Romero that change is possible:

'The church would betray its own love for God and its fidelity to the gospel if it stopped being... a defender of the rights of the poor, a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society, something to hope for'.

Hope believes that Christ has already overcome sin and death, therefore we can have confidence that suffering and evil never, ever have the final say. As Paul tells the suffering church in Rome, 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.'

As a missionary in Brazil, I remember a Pentecost celebration where we walked around the neighbourhood from the cathedral carrying processional crosses draped with white T shirts soaked in blood, each carrying the photo of a priest, sister, catechist or lay Christian who had been murdered for their faith. It challenges the reality of one's Christian witness to live in a church of martyrs. Christian hope can't eliminate suffering, but it does transform it. The Resurrection gives the Cross meaning. As Jesus found in the Garden of Gethsemane, hope is most necessary and most possible precisely in moments of despair. When injustice seems overwhelming, when suffering seems meaningless, hope insists that love is still victorious and makes that promise real. Hope is dangerous to the status quo because it doesn't just offer *placebo* religious comfort – it demands change. That is why those whose power rests on dictatorship and oppressive systems have seen Christianity as a threat ever since Herod sought to kill the king of the Jews born in Bethlehem. Jesus tells his disciples, 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you'. Romero found this to his cost. But hope is participation in the very life of God. To hope is to trust that God's love is at work in the world, even when we can't see it. And that hope moves us to act, to love, and to seek justice without ceasing and without compromise.

The grotesque injustices of our world don't generally stem from incomprehensibly demonic human beings. They're the accumulation and interdependence of all our failures of solidarity, our desperate seeking for security at others' expense and our doctoring of the truth. It's what we call the sin of the world, and every generation faces the life and death battle against this sin in its own way. God invites us to engage tirelessly in the battle against the powers of darkness. It is likely that our reward, in this world at least, will be to be crucified with Jesus. But in the face of his own death, he assured his disciples that he had overcome the world. Shortly before his

assassination in 1980, Romero claimed, 'If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people.' He believed that to live and die in faith, hope and love is to share in the life and death of Jesus. It is to share in his prayer which is the Cross and to share in the answer to that prayer, which is resurrection from all that is death-dealing.

It can be hugely painful to go on praying in hope in the face of so much that would convince us to despair, but to fail would be to fall into the idolatrous delusion of thinking that it is our efforts and our power that will change the world rather than the power of the crucified and risen Jesus, shining through our human weakness. We pray in hope, not so that we can change God's mind, but so that God can change our mind to become attentive, to recognize God's power at work in the world. God has given each one of us in this cathedral gifts and skills to become a beacon of hope in the world, a transformed transformer. Every time we use those gifts to make a better world in God's name, we join Oscar Romero in being pilgrims of hope.