

Romero Week 2017

Homily given by Fr Jim O'Keefe

at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool

*Mass Celebrating the Centenary of Blessed Oscar Romero's Birth
and Blessing of the Romero Bust*

Third Sunday of Lent, 19 March 2017

Fr Jim O'Keefe

As the years pass, more and more Christian Communities around the world bring to mind the witness of Blessed Oscar Romero. Next Friday, 24th March, is the 37th anniversary of his murder by a death squad while he celebrated Mass in the hospital chapel across the road from the small bungalow where he lived. Today is a very special occasion in Liverpool when the magnificent bust of Oscar Romero, created by the sculptor Rory Young is unveiled and blessed by Archbishop McMahon.

On the Third Sunday in Lent 1978, less than a year after he became Archbishop of San Salvador, he preached using the same readings as we have today. His homily, as usual, was about an hour long...fear not, nothing like that will happen today. He said to the congregation and the whole country, since his homilies were broadcast throughout the land: *The Samaritan woman has become an apostle, and like an apostle she attracts many people to Christ*¹. I'd like to suggest that this is exactly what Oscar Arnulfo Romero did during his life and continues to do today.

When Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink, he was breaking a serious social code. Five hundred years before this conversation took place, the Samaritans built a Temple of their own on Mount Gerazim. Two hundred years before the conversation, some Jewish zealots totally destroyed it. It is rather an understatement for John to say that 'Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other', they actually hated each other. Jesus was not expected to speak to a Samaritan, especially one with a shocking reputation who came to the well for water at the heat of the day. She came at that time to avoid the looks and gossip and accusations of every other woman in the village to which she'd be subjected if she'd come at the usual time, early morning, to avoid the heat of the day.

Jesus entered into conversation with her, expressed his need for water – unimaginable for a Jewish man to show any need to a Samaritan woman with such a reputation - and this conversation was life giving to the woman. Far more life giving than the water they both needed. So life giving that the woman abandons her water bottle at the end of the story to become a missionary in her village. The engagement between them changed her life entirely.

It would have been Oscar Romero's 100th birthday in August this year. He was born, one of 8 children, into a relatively poor family – and he never forgot his roots. Indeed it seems that his experience as an archbishop accelerated his willingness to re-engage with the extremely poor and persecuted people in his diocese. Until he was named as bishop of the diocese of Santiago de

¹ *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People*. Trans Joseph Owens SJ. The Complete Homilies of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero Vol 2 p 274

Maria in 1974, he had been a fairly obscure priest doing his job - working with people. As Monsignor and then Auxiliary bishop he'd spent 7 years pretty well sitting at a desk as secretary to the bishops' conference and drafting talks and speeches for the Pope's representative, the Apostolic nuncio. He wasn't completely out of touch with people in Santiago de Maria: he did open up old school classrooms for poor peasants to find shelter during the coffee picking season. He then got into a routine when he would visit the people in these makeshift dwellings, bring them hot milk and talk with them. But by and large he was seen as a very pious, hard-working, very traditional priest and bishop, who was not particularly well loved by very many priests and people in his diocese.

But then in March 1977, just three weeks after he was appointed Archbishop, something very dramatic happened to him. A Jesuit priest in his diocese, Rutilio Grande, along with an elderly sacristan, Manuel, and a young altar server, Nelson, were ambushed and murdered as they drove from one village to another to celebrate Mass. Rutilio Grande was a friend of Oscar Romero's, they had supported each other years earlier when Rutilio was on the staff of the Seminary where Oscar Romero lived when he was secretary to the Bishops' Conference. As soon as he heard about the deaths, the Archbishop drove to the village and knelt and prayed over the bodies. It seems that something shifted inside him, and this experience of violent loss pushed him into an ever deeper understanding of the lives and struggles of the poor in his country. He celebrated Requiem Mass for them during that night of 12 March, their bodies still wet with blood. This moment was pivotal in the life of the Archbishop, as his successor, Rivera y Damas said:

*'A martyr gave life to another martyr. Before the body of Father Rutilio Grande, Monsignor Romero, on his twentieth day as archbishop, felt the call of Christ to overcome his natural human shyness and be filled with apostolic courage. From that moment, Monsignor Romero left behind the pagan lands of Tyre and Sidon, and marched boldly towards Jerusalem.'*²

Here we all are in Lent. In three weeks' time we will celebrate Holy Week. We will all relive the journey of Jesus from the Holy Thursday evening and his struggle to get the Apostles to understand that life is about service, not power, through the Agony in the Garden, trials, abandonment, isolation, torture and death. During the last three years of his life, it became clear to Oscar Romero that he was on a collision course with the powers in the land which would force him to choose between: either backing away from the truth about the lives of the poor or to speak the truth and be killed for it. It may be that at that particular moment as he knelt over the bodies of Rutilio, Manuel and Nelson, he chose to significantly deepen his commitment to the poor. Incidentally, the cause for beatification of all three of them is currently being presented in Rome. It may be that in the very near future, all three of them will be declared to be 'Blessed'

At that particular moment he was infused with courage. During that night he decided that there would be a single Mass celebrated the following Sunday in the whole archdiocese of San Salvador, and this would be celebrated for Rutilio and his companions. You can just imagine the reaction from other bishops, priests, the wealthy land owners and some people. How would they fulfil their 'Sunday Obligation' if they couldn't go to their local church and couldn't get to

² *Archbishop Romero and Liberation Theology*, Martin Maier S.J. quoted in Romero News Issue 19 January 2017 p 12

the Cathedral? It would cause just as much chaos in this diocese if Archbishop Malcom suggested that there would only be a single Mass this year in your Diocese on Palm Sunday in three weeks' time. It would cause chaos. More than 100,000 people filled the square in front of the Cathedral in San Salvador that day. Over a hundred priests concelebrated – a risky thing to do at that time given that soon afterwards a popular car sticker around the city read: 'Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest'. The Archbishop was now on the road to Calvary.

For Oscar Romero, and some other thinkers in the country at that time, the suffering, persecuted people were the Crucified Christ. He believed that the closer he came to the helplessness of the people, the closer he was to Jesus, the closer he was to God. He is not just a teacher and a martyr to justice for the poor. He is someone who has something vital to say to us in our time. His call is to everyone in the Christian Family, and it is a privilege for us to have Canon Ellen Loundon with us today from your neighbouring Anglican Cathedral. Oscar Romero's life is an invitation for every one of us to become more committed to Jesus Christ and so come together in our search for unity. He might well say to us today that we are to learn to become united in our commitment to become taken over by the agenda of the poor, however we describe them – prisoners, drug addicts, people seeking asylum, refugees, the people of South Sudan and East Africa, the housebound, wherever. The more we allow the agenda of the poor to take us over, the more we become the Body of Christ in our world today. We gather today to share the Word and the Eucharist – which will indeed help us to become the Body of Christ, we don't so much come to Church as become the Church.

Oscar Romero received many death threats during his time as Archbishop. His prayer was that if he was killed, he would not suffer and no one else would be killed with him. He must have suffered during his 'Agony', suffered the lack of support from some of his fellow bishops and the slandering from those who opposed him, but his death was quick, and no one was killed with him.

He was a man of immense courage. He knew the moment he was going to die and we know that for certain because the evidence lies in the folds of his clothing, his trousers and his shirt. There is a significant deposit of salt in his clothing, a natural secretion from the body at a moment of intense fear. He is a saint because he loved his faith and people hated him for loving his faith. He constantly challenges us to wonder how much do we love our faith – are we anywhere near as willing to take the risks he did to witness to the Lord in our time and place.

May the last word go to Monsignor Urioste. Mgr Urioste was Archbishop Romero's Vicar General. I met him thirty years ago, in 1987, on a visit to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Cuba on behalf of CAFOD, when he was deeply involved with helping refugees return from neighbouring countries. I met him again three years ago, not long before he died when he said this:

There are three characteristics of Christ in the Gospels:

- *He had a permanent relationship with the Father*
- *He imagined a very different world where all relationships would be right*
- *He spend a great deal of time with the poor*

I believe that Oscar Romero was the same. He prayed a great deal, he imagined a world where all would be treated with respect and he spent a great deal of time with poor people and learned a great deal from them.

Mgr Urioste then added: *The poor are the 'soul' of the country ... they have to show us how we live to ensure that all live in peace and harmony.*

In a few moments after we join in our proclamation of the Creed and the Prayers of the Faithful, we will move into the Preparation of the Gifts at the Offertory of our Mass. It was at this very moment during the 6.00pm Mass for the mother of Jorge Pinto friend of Oscar Romero's and editor of a weekly newspaper, El Independiente. He had just preached on a phrase from John's Gospel: *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains just grain of wheat...* As he picked up the pattern with the host on it, three men entered the church and he was shot dead. I have on my phone a recording of that moment, a recording made by one of the sisters present at the front of the chapel. I listen to it whenever I'm on Retreat, - just to remind me what it is all about. It was at this moment, Blessed Oscar Romero moved from meeting Jesus in the celebration of Mass and in the lives of the poor to being with Jesus for all Eternity.