

*Homily by Bishop John Rawsthorne given during Sunday Worship on BBC Radio 4 on Sunday, 24 September 2017 from the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool*  
A recording is available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b095qcjf>

The Archbishop  
**Romero Trust**

Yesterday at Choral Evensong in Westminster Abbey, this morning at Choral Morning Prayer here in this Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool we celebrate the centenary of the birth of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, martyr.

Oscar Romero died a martyr because he was faithful, to God, to the Gospel message of love, justice and peace, and faithful to the poor and oppressed people of his country.

He was born on the feast of the Assumption, 1917, into a family that just about made ends meet. When he left school at 12, he was apprenticed for a short time to a carpenter, but then went to study for the priesthood and was ordained priest in 1942. In 1977, at the age of 60, he was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador.

And in this smallest of all Latin American countries, the world in which he became Archbishop was one where almost all the land was owned by an oligarchy, where there was grinding poverty, and violent oppression by the military.

Within a month of his arrival, as part of a campaign of murder that would go way beyond his own death, his good friend Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest and one of the most respected priests in El Salvador, was gunned down in his car with two companions. It was a terrible blow to the new Archbishop.

The Church has always been given life through the blood of those who have died for the Gospel, but Oscar Romero's life and death have had an unusually profound effect both within the Church and far beyond it. While he preached the Gospel to everybody, he spoke first of all to and for his own people. He was their voice; he has been called the voice of the voiceless.

He was a wonderful speaker; indeed, his Sunday sermons could last an hour and a half, sometimes longer. But he was also a wonderful listener. First, he listened. He travelled the Diocese listening, in remote villages, to the poorest of the poor, always with respect and full attention. They said that he was shaped by his listening. And people would hear their own words when he preached.

But most of all, his preaching was based in prayer. He was always known as a man of prayer.

When he had listened, he prayed. One of the lovely stories about his humour concerned the decision he eventually made after the murder of his friend Rutilio Grande to have only one Mass

in the Diocese the following Sunday, just in the Cathedral. He looked everywhere for advice on the matter and eventually met a friend who reminded him that the best thing to do was to go to talk with Jesus. He met him later. 'We've talked' he said, 'and he's in agreement too'.

But he was not alone in his prayer. People always held him in their prayers, and told him so.

He said: I want to express thanks publicly for the strength that I receive from the prayers of so many. Nothing for me is so beautiful than to hear: 'we are praying for you. You are not alone. We are with you in our prayer.' God be blessed. Thank you.

His Sunday sermons were broadcast on the diocesan radio station. They became a must across the country. Everybody listened, including police and army. Another of those stories, of the young couple listening in their car when a police car drew up next to them at the lights and they hastily switched off, but the Archbishop's voice carried on because the two policemen were tuned in as well. He was a great communicator.

His sermons would be based on the day's Scripture, and mainly that, but always led into the latest examples of oppression from all over the country, naming names and issuing challenges. Even the President was named a liar on one occasion.

Eventually, the radio station was blown up, just a month before his death. By the following Sunday, he had a telephone line to Costa Rica, with an altar server holding the handset to his mouth, and from Costa Rica the homily was broadcast by short wave back to El Salvador and the rest of Central America, even as far away as Colombia and Venezuela!

In the first three months of 1980, there were 800 deaths. They were terrible times and getting worse. On Sunday, 23 March 1980, the last Sunday of his life, the new radio was working. At the end of the homily he spoke the words which were to finally sign his death warrant. In a special appeal to the security forces, he said: Brothers, you are part of our own people. You are killing your own brother and sister campesinos, and against any order man may give to kill, God's law must prevail: You shall not kill. No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. ... It is time now for you to reclaim your conscience and to obey your conscience rather than the command to sin.... We want the Government to take us seriously when we say that reforms are useless when they come stained with so much blood. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise up each day more tumultuously to heaven, I beg you, I beseech, I order you in the name of God, stop the repression.

The gospel at Mass on the next evening was the gospel we heard this morning: Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you most solemnly, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest. ... If a man serves me, he must follow me. Wherever I am, my servant will be there too.'

As the Archbishop began to prepare the wheaten bread and the wine for the Eucharist, a single shot rang out. And he dropped to the ground.

The proclamation at his beatification in San Salvador in 2015 said profoundly but simply:

Oscar Romero  
Bishop and Martyr  
Pastor according to the heart of Christ  
Evangelist and Father of the Poor  
Heroic witness of the Kingdom of God,  
The Kingdom of Justice, of Brotherhood and Peace.