

**THANKSGIVING MASS: ST OSCAR ROMERO
ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL, SOUTHWARK: 3 NOVEMBER 2018**

Homily delivered by Archbishop Bernard Longley

I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth.

Two days ago we celebrated the Solemnity of All Saints. On that day the Church remembers all the men and women whose lives and faith reflect the visible presence of God's love and truth in the world and whose example continues to inspire us. The saints continue to journey within the tradition of the Church because they accompany us along our own pilgrim way and they support us with their prayers.

As I came into St Georges' Cathedral this morning it was very moving to stop at the Romero Cross and to venerate the relic linking us with the moment of Archbishop Romero's martyrdom. It is a small piece of the alb that he was wearing when he was shot during Mass. It was also very poignant to see a depiction of the late Bishop Michael Evans at the foot of the cross – he would surely have wanted to be part of today's celebration.

Today, gathered here at St George's Cathedral, this Mass of thanksgiving celebrates a new addition to the communion of saints – new but far from unfamiliar! For so many people, the recognition of Oscar Romero as a saint of the Church is the culmination of years of hard work and prayer. The road to this canonisation has not always been a simple or an easy one, but then the road towards sainthood seldom is and that in itself is an important element of acknowledging a person's holiness.

The joy of our thanksgiving for St Oscar Romero's canonisation is shared beyond the Catholic Church by other Christian communities, by people of other faiths and more widely by men and women of goodwill. The statue of Romero on the façade of Westminster Abbey and his image in St Alban's Cathedral testify to the devotion of many Anglicans to his memory long before his canonisation in the Catholic Church looked probable. Many have been moved by his life and witness and this universal appeal of Oscar Romero is a recognition of his willingness to proclaim God's love and truth, despite the cost.

Since his martyrdom in 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero has been increasingly celebrated as a man of faith and considered a prophet for our times, who saw

and spoke out against injustices within his country. He united himself with the poorest of his people and gave a 'voice to the voiceless'.

When we are drawn towards particular saints we discover that they are relevant to us because their human experience has much in common with our own. They were part of a family with its joys and challenges, they experienced the hardships that life could sometimes bring and they were acutely aware of their own shortcomings and failings. However, their experience of life is was characterised by a compelling openness to listen to God's voice, and a deep desire to serve the Lord.

For St Oscar Romero, the desire to unite himself to Christ and to serve the people God had given him to shepherd also gave him courage when he needed it the most. During his ministry as Archbishop of San Salvador, there were certainly moments when he, like Jesus, prayed that 'this cup may pass from me'. We think of those times when he spoke out against social injustice, the disappearances, tortures and assassinations, and when he challenged the authorities about the poverty afflicting his people. He knew that his words would focus unwanted attention on himself, but he continued to speak out.

In those moments when the authorities tried to silence him, when he was bombed off the air because of his message and when accusations in the media were made against him in an attempt to undermine the truth of that message, he found the strength to overcome his own fears for the sake of God's people. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians St Paul tells us that we carry in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may always be seen in our body. Oscar Romero came to embrace the meaning of those words through his martyrdom. His inner strength came from a desire to unite himself to Christ – to be at one with Jesus in his prayer to the Father.

St John's Gospel draws us into the prayer that Jesus made in the presence of his disciples. He prayed that they would be true to God's name and that the Father would keep the disciples safe. It is significant that this prayer was offered on the eve of his passion. We recognise it as a prayer that also embraces the life of St Oscar Romero and his manner of dying.

Through the passion and death of Jesus the disciples came to know God's love. In reflecting on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross they heard an echo of his prayer: *for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth.* That prayer was to re-echo through the martyrdom of Oscar Romero as he celebrated the Eucharist - as his personal sacrifice was providentially united to the life-giving sacrifice of Christ.

Did Oscar Romero set out in life to become a saint? I am quite sure that he never considered himself to be worthy or holy enough to be declared a saint. However, as Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI observes, *'holiness is not a quest for perfection, but a willingness to unite ourselves to Christ, so that we may become perfect.'* That willingness to unite himself with Christ was at the heart of Archbishop Romero's vocation to Christian discipleship and it led him to treasure and embody integrity.

During the Mass of Canonisation Pope Francis reflected on the words of Jesus, inviting the rich young man to follow him. The Holy Father reminded us that as disciples of Jesus we should not only walk with him when we want to, when it is convenient, but every day. St Oscar Romero followed Jesus every day, knowing the cost of doing so. Every injustice he challenged, every time he spoke out in support of the poorest and most marginalised community, and in every prayer he offered on their behalf, he walked in the presence of Jesus for their sake and for the world.

As his integrity of life and the power of his faith continue to offer a challenging witness to the world today, may they also reflect the consolation of God's love and the triumph of God's glory. May the saint's own words accompany us into the mystery of the Eucharist today: *If we are worth anything, it is not because we have more money or more talent, or more human qualities. Insofar as we are worth anything, it is because we are grafted onto Christ's life, his cross and resurrection. That is a person's measure.*

St Oscar Romero.....Pray for us.