

Romero Anniversary Service - *Witnesses of Dying and Rising*:
St. Martin-in-the-Fields - London
29th March 2008

Homily by Tony Lester, O.Carm.

At the outset I would like to draw attention to the fact that there are three of us priests here today: Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic. This is perhaps a sign that in a Church which is still sadly divided we can find unity and meaning in the witness of the martyrs.

It is a great honour to be here today in this beautiful church which is so close to the centre of our national life and which, in its ministry and outreach to the poor and marginalised, would be so close to the heart of Archbishop Oscar Romero the anniversary of whose death we keep today.

The memory of Romero the martyr is well established in the hearts and minds of the Christian people, not just in El Salvador but throughout the world. You have only to do a search on *Facebook* and other "social networking sites" to find that his memory and voice are not a matter of the past, a fading memory in a now aging generation, but rather a living voice which continues to inspire, challenge and energise others, especially our young people, to action and commitment. Romero the martyr is familiar to us - I would like to reflect with you for a moment on Romero the prophet.

The prophets of the Old Testament had a burning concern for the name of God and the right worship of the One who is God. They understood the vital importance this has for the life of the people - not in any sense of liturgical purity but because the worship of the true God is literally a matter of life and death. The concern of the prophet is not for the individual "one to one encounter" of "my faith is a personal private thing", rather the prophet challenges the faith of the nation. Perhaps for Romero a greater part of the challenge he faced was that he was a Roman Catholic Archbishop in a country where Roman Catholicism was and is a part of the very fabric of society. What comes to us from the worship of the true God is the truth about the human family that we are all brothers and sisters.

Worship of God which is not open to this truth is idolatry. Worship of God that colludes with and supports powers and structures which dehumanise or which rob humanity of its dignity has nothing to do with the God of Jesus Christ - it is become an abomination. Romero's voice on behalf of the poor and those committed lay people, religious and priests who were working alongside the poor was not some form of social activism but was a voice of God and on behalf of God.

Religion is a very complex and ambiguous reality. Romero found, as we have heard in the reading from the poem by Bishop Casaldaliga, that he was abandoned by his own brothers who shared his ministry as bishop. Yet, like all the prophets of the true and living God Romero could not remain silent because he had met the God of Jesus Christ and with his eyes knew that it was Christ who suffered and died in the people of El Salvador. Romero knew with absolute clarity that he was most likely to share their fate: as did the martyred members of the Melanesian brotherhood and as did Archbishop

Faraj of Mosul (Iraq) only a few days ago as a consequence of a war dreamed "in the name of God" by a religious Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and President of the USA. The use and abuse of the name of God for political ends is perhaps one of the greatest sins of our age.

Romero's voice and ministry shed the light of the Gospel on the situation in El Salvador in a particular moment in history. Whilst the Gospel is the same everywhere he believed that the preaching of the Gospel has to be specific. It is the concrete circumstances of a time and culture which must inform and direct the preaching of the Good News.

We celebrate this day in the light of Easter, and the light of the Easter candle shines on the images of our martyrs as does the light of the Risen Christ shine on their faces in God's Realm. In our Gospel reading (Luke 24: 35-38) Jesus shows his wounds to his disciples and invites them to touch him. He gives us that same invitation to reach out, find him, touch him in those most in need; to take a stand with the poor, the handicapped, those excluded from society and those excluded from our Christian churches. Then from that stand point, from a position on the margins to read the Gospel. In this way the poor might teach us to read the Gospel as they taught Oscar Romero, so that we in our day, culture and time, in this concrete moment of history might be faithful to the true and living God of Jesus Christ.

Amen.