

St George's Cathedral, Southwark
Saturday, 13 August 2016

Mass to mark the 99th birthday of Blessed Oscar Romero

Oscar Romero – An inspiring example for our times

About two months ago I attended a meeting in the Diocese of East Anglia about the phenomenon of human slavery in the area around Peterborough, Wisbech and Boston. I was horrified by what I heard.

Two young police officers working in the area – one from Lithuania and the other originally from Slovakia – spoke movingly about how unscrupulous recruiters often travel to Lithuania, Slovakia and Albania and entice many hundreds of young men and women with all kinds of false promises to come and work in the agricultural and food processing industries in the UK.

They promise good jobs, good money and good living conditions. The reality is that when they arrive by bus in Kent their passports are taken, their freedom is limited and they are consigned to work in factories and on farms living literally as slaves in awful conditions.

It was at that stage, I began to re-read some of the homilies of Oscar Romero in preparation for today's celebration. Very quickly, I realised that he truly is an inspiring example of how to respond prophetically to the suffering and injustice we see in the world around us today. One of the homilies that both inspired and challenged me was his homily on the Good Samaritan. With true humility Romero began that homily by acknowledging his and indeed everyone's need for conversion. "We all have to examine our conscience in the light of the parable of the Good Samaritan".

As you know Oscar Romero underwent a profound conversion in his own life. As secretary general of the Bishops' Conference and as an auxiliary bishop he criticised the social involvement of the clergy that came in the wake of Medellin but then his experience as the bishop of Santiago de Mara and especially as the Archbishop of San Salvador brought him close to those who were suffering and being exploited – close to the rural farmers being exploited by landowners, close to communities being terrorised by the army, close to wives whose husbands were unjustly imprisoned by the police, close to destitute and poor families living in the barrios of San Salvador and close to the women who mourned the disappearance of their children. That experience changed him forever.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Luke creatively uses the word 'to see' in two ways. First, he describes how the priest and Levite 'see' the man who was attacked and who is lying at the side of the road but they pass by on the other side. Remember, they are walking in the same direction as the man – going downhill from Jerusalem to Jericho – in all probability they are coming from the Temple. They 'see' but they also make a decision 'not to see'. The Good Samaritan, however, doesn't just see with his eyes he sees with his heart and is moved to compassion. Likewise, Oscar Romero's eyes were opened and his heart was moved by the terrible suffering and injustice he witnessed. The first step in Romero's journey was to go back to the other side of the road and like the Good Samaritan respond to the man who was attacked.

As the story unfolds Luke describes how the Good Samaritan responds with great compassion and sensitivity: he goes up and bandages his wounds pouring oil and wine on them. Luke then makes the point that an essential part of being 'sensitive' to the suffering of others is 'staying' with the suffering of others. The Good Samaritan brings the man to an inn, stays with him overnight and not only pays the innkeeper but persuades him to take care of the man until he returns and promises he will make good any extra expense that the innkeeper has.

From my experience of growing up in Killarney – a thriving centre of the Irish tourist industry with many hotels and guesthouses – I can imagine that the innkeeper took some persuading to take in a wounded man as a guest. Taking care of him would demand time and energy and being seen talking to a Samaritan would certainly not be good for business. For me the Good Samaritan is the example of how to. He truly 'sees' the suffering: he is 'sensitive' to the suffering: he 'stays' with the suffering and he 'speaks up' for those who are suffering. That is precisely what Oscar Romero did in his ministry in El Salvador.

Through this parable Jesus invites us and challenges us to open our eyes and see the vulnerable people and the vulnerable communities in our world today – who they are, where they are and how they are enslaved and exploited. Through this parable Jesus invites us and inspires us to reach out and become instruments of God's Mercy in our world today through the practical care and help we give to the victims of violence and exploitation.

Finally, through this parable Jesus invites us and challenges us to become prophets of God's Mercy and speak up for and speak out for those who suffer and are exploited. This means reminding our fellow Christians and our fellow citizens of the reality of exploitation in our country and our world today. This means reminding the leaders of business that the dignity of all workers (no matter how menial their work is) must be respected. This means reminding and working with Government to ensure that everything is done that can be done (through legislation and action) to eradicate such exploitation and prevent it happening in the future. This means doing all we can to bring to justice the perpetrators of such injustice.

One of the people who helped me to appreciate the tremendous contribution that the Latin American Church has made to our understanding of mission is a man and brother in religious life called Fr. Enrique Moreno. Enrique was and still is a very well know priest and journalist in Chile. During the time of Pinochet he was imprisoned on a number of occasions for what he said and wrote. In 1992 we were both attending a meeting for provincials of our religious congregation in Rome when he spoke eloquently from his experience and about his experience. He helped me to see and understand that an essential element of the Mission of the Church is building a more just world in solidarity with the poor.

That phrase 'in solidarity with the poor' is very important. That is precisely what Oscar Romero tried to do in El Salvador. The only way we can begin do that is, like the Good Samaritan and Romero, by truly seeing, being sensitive to, staying with and speaking up for those who suffer and are exploited in our world today. Fr. Enrique reminded me that we begin that journey like the Good Samaritan and Romero by allowing ourselves be moved by the wonderful gift of God's Mercy and compassion and going back across the road if we are tempted to pass by.

Let us pray that the Lord will help us to do that.