

CAFOD-Romero Trust

Holy Island Pilgrimage

8 July 2023

Fr Jim O'Keefe

Homily given at the Mass concluding the first CAFOD-Romero Trust Pilgrimage to Holy Island

A few moments ago we heard Catherine tell us the story of Jacob (a name which means 'Supplanter' in English) and Esau (which means 'hairy'), two sons of Isaac, who in turn was the son of Abraham. It is an amazing story – because Jacob, despite being the younger of the sons, manages, admittedly through slight of hand and the help of his mother (Rebekah) – I make no comment at all about that – manages to claim his father's patronage. His position of authority. This is totally against the traditional ways of the Middle East. The younger son wins! It is breaking new ground, it is saying 'the future will be different', it is saying, the past is over. There are new ways of doing things. With the help of the Holy Spirit – huge changes are possible in our lives, we can live differently – this is what our Pilgrimage today is about, let's imagine how we can live 'differently'.

We've just heard our Deacon, David, proclaim the Gospel. David told us that the disciples of Jesus didn't fast when the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees did. Something new is afoot here. The old way of being a good person – fasting when you're supposed to, not picking corn on the Sabbath and so on – is being taken over by a new way. The new way is to be in relationship with Jesus. We are to follow Jesus in our lives, our love is to be active! It doesn't work to put a patch of new cloth over the hole in an old garment, they'll tear apart. The new cloth – following Jesus – can't really be grafted into an old way of living, unless the old way of living changes! The message is summed in one word – Repent, change direction, a word first used by John the Baptist himself. With the help of the Holy Spirit – huge changes are possible in our lives, this is what our Pilgrimage is about.

Centuries later, one Mgr Oscar Romero was appointed Archbishop of El Salvador on 3rd February 1977. The date matters. He was only in the job for 3 years! But what a three years! The government and wealthy families were delighted. They believed they had a champion who would befriend them and support them. Many of his brother priests were deeply saddened. They saw him as a reactionary, someone not in touch with the poor, not in tune with the direction of many of the other bishops in Latin America and certainly not a friend of many of the Jesuits who ministered selflessly, intelligently and courageously in his Archdiocese.

On 12th March that year, 1977, a mere 30 days after his installation as Archbishop, his friend, a relatively young Jesuit, Rutilio Grande (he was 48 years old), was assassinated along with a teenager (Nelson, an altar server) and an older man (Manuel, a sacristan) by a death squad. They were on their way to celebrate Mass in a local town, the village in fact where Rutilio was

born. The death squad had done their homework, watching the journey on previous occasions. They fired numerous bullets into the front of the Volkswagen Safari, killing all three, Rutilio, Nelson and Manuel, instantaneously, thankfully missing the 3 small children sitting in the back of the car – Rutilio had picked them up to give them a lift. One of the children recognised one of the gunmen as his godfather.

The Archbishop, Oscar Romero, was called and he rushed to the church. Kneeling down next to the bodies, something fundamental shifted inside him. He told another friend, another Jesuit, some weeks later: *'When I saw Rutilio dead, I thought, if they killed him for what he was doing, it's my job to go down the same road...I changed, I also came back home again'*. He went back to his roots. With the help of the Holy Spirit – huge changes are possible in the way we live our lives.

From then on, Mgr Romero became an utterly dedicated spokesman for justice for the poor. He supported those who spoke out for the fullness of life for those being persecuted. In his Sunday homilies he named those who had been 'disappeared' and he championed those who worked to reunite those who had been killed with their families.

A mere three years later, on 24th March 1980, he himself was assassinated while celebrating an evening Mass. It was a Monday evening. He had just finished preaching on the text from John's Gospel; 'Unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains only a single grain, if it dies it bears much fruit'. He was about to pick up the bread for the offertory and at that moment a sniper entered the chapel in the hospital grounds where he lived in a small apartment across the road, and shot him. The evidence of a significant deposit of salt in his clothing suggests that he saw what was to happen, and his body reacted in fear, producing all that salt. One of his prayers had been answered. He always prayed that if he was to be killed, it would be quick and that no one would be killed with him. It was quick, and no one else died.

I mentioned his Sunday homilies – they were legendary. Everyone listened to them, including those who vehemently opposed him. His enemies – many of whom were Catholics – tried on a number of occasions to destroy the Radio Station (which broadcast the homilies across El Salvador and beyond), in fact it was bombed twice in January and February 1980, just a month before he died. One of the institutions which helped to restore the Radio Station was CAFOD. CAFOD's Headquarters, as I'm sure you all know, is called Romero House. Just across the backyard from Romero House is St George's Cathedral, the Cathedral for the Archdiocese of Southwark. In that Cathedral is the newly dedicated National Shrine of St Oscar Romero, with the current Archbishop, John Wilson, a most ardent supporter of the life and ministry of the Saint. Next time you're in London, please do visit, take the tube to Lambeth North, turn left and you'll be there in 15 minutes!

I wondered what Romero would make of CAFOD's 'Seeds of Change' campaign? I imagine quite a lot. His last homily was on that wonderful text from John's Gospel, the reflection on the dying and rising of the seed to a harvest. The dying of Rutilio gave way to the harvest of Romero and his witness. Romero was frequently outspoken about the power of the dominant rich families who continued to exploit the *campesinos*. St Romero once described the worst of the rich families as 'baptised pagans'. He never minced his words! He would unquestionably have some very clear things to say about governments across the world who have adopted seed laws

which restrict the small farmers' abilities to use their own local varieties of seeds to sustain them throughout the year. I suspect he would be extremely articulate about the World Bank supporting giant corporations which seriously limit the options of the poor farmers in favour of their own massive profits. I think Romero would gently whisper into the ears of all of us that we are capable of overcoming feelings of impotence. Jesus is a radical alternative! I'm sure he would say to CAFOD supporters that the seeds issue, the climate change issue, the poverty issue and the literacy issue are all central to preaching the Gospel! I'm sure that Romero would say that, encouraged by CAFOD and our Justice and Peace networks, our Church can encourage compassion and solidarity on behalf of all of our sisters and brothers.

I'm conscious that we're here on this hallowed piece of earth, Holy Island. The island of Aidan, Cuthbert, the genius scribe Aldred who created the Lindisfarne Gospels, the most magnificent book to emerge from Anglo Saxon England. I love it, and have done since I was a child growing up down the coast in Amble. Aidan's little school of 12 pupils produced at least 4 bishops, the two brothers Chad and Cedd as well as Wilfred and Eata. Aidan was also the mentor of Hilda of Whitby. These people are voices of the Lord. One of Romero's favourite sayings was that we are all meant to be 'Microphones of God'. He once said: *'God's best microphone is Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the Church and the Church is all of you'*. He said, not long before he died: *'If some day... they kill all the priests and the bishop, too, and you are left – a people without priests – then each one of you must be God's microphone, a messenger, a prophet...'*

I doubt that in our small part of the world, that priests and bishops will be martyred! Along with lay men and women, Christians are indeed martyred – but not in our part of the world. I fear that this weakens the voices of all those baptised. We're inclined to leave it to 'clergy' – this is simply not good enough. We're all baptised, we're all called to be microphones!

Wow, what a fantastic affirmation for all the baptised. It's true, we've had a tough time in our diocese (Hexham and Newcastle) in recent months and I'm sure that our struggles, our hopeful struggles with our future bishop, Stephen Wright, will bear fruit in the future. It is tough, but nowhere near as tough as it was in the 1980s in El Salvador. But we, too, in Hexham and Newcastle can be mightily encouraged and affirmed by St Oscar's words, let us all fully realise that we, the body of Christ, are the Body Language of God, when we speak, let's speak the words of the Lord. Let's be totally inspired by our local saints, St Oscar and the work of CAFOD – and let's just get on with it! We're baptised and called to be followers of Jesus. The Institution of the Church is to help us to love Jesus. If we struggle with the Institution, let's continue to love the Lord. Let us become more attentive to the needs of people in our local communities and our global family.

So there you have it. It is a privilege for us all to be here, on this first ever joint CAFOD Romero pilgrimage. We pray that the Holy Spirit in St Oscar Romero will inspire us, we pray that the witness of CAFOD will inspire us, and we pray that those great men and women of the past may enable each of us to become a microphone of God in our world today. With the help of the Holy Spirit – huge changes are possible in our lives, too.

Thank you so much for coming.

