

**Homily by Bishop Michael Evans at St John's Cathedral, Norwich,
on the 30th anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero
(24th March 2010, the Eve of the Solemnity of the Annunciation)**

I still remember waking up on the morning of the Solemnity of the Annunciation on 25th March 1980, sleepily switching on my radio, and hearing the news that Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador has been shot dead while celebrating Mass. There was a deep sense of shock.

Like many others, I had been following his struggle in El Salvador during the previous three years since he became Archbishop. He had become increasingly outspoken in the face of the growing violence, especially by the army and the death squads against the poor and those who worked with them. A number of his priests had been killed. There were frequent death threats against himself. He was gaining a high profile at home and abroad, and already becoming an inspiration to many working for justice and peace in world.

Today five years ago, I was in El Salvador for Romero's 25th anniversary celebrations, representing the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Besides a big celebration in San Salvador, there was also Mass with our CAFOD team in the chapel of the Divine Providence Cancer Hospital where Romero lived. I celebrated Mass at the very spot where Romero was shot. On the wall behind the altar there is now a plaque which reads: 'At this altar, Monsenor Romero offered his life to God for his people.' This fits well with our diocesan theme for this year - 'I offer my life to God' - as we focus together on the sacrificial love of God for us, present especially in the Sacrifice of the Mass and served by the sacrificial life of our priests.

During the trip, I also visited an art gallery in San Salvador with a special Romero exhibition. I was particularly struck by a painting of Romero standing alone in the midst of the city, holding high a cross. He was like a voice crying in wilderness, and instantly reminded me of St John the Baptist.

It seems especially appropriate that we are celebrating Romero's anniversary in our Cathedral of St John the Baptist. I see today as very much part of our Cathedral Centenary Year celebrations. Archbishop Romero's life, prophetic ministry and martyrdom - all founded upon his life of holiness and prayer - is a powerful challenge to this Cathedral parish, to our whole Diocese of East Anglia, and to the wider Christian community, regarding our own calling to stand up and be counted in our world.

Like Romero, we are summoned by God himself to stand up in the public space, whatever others may think or however they may respond, even when we are merely a voice crying in the wilderness, but always speaking the truth in love for God and God's people.

In December 2008, I was invited onto BBC Radio Norfolk's version of Desert Island Discs. I could choose four or five pieces of music. I deliberately chose pieces I could use as pegs on which to focus what I wanted to talk about. My choices were not what they were used to! There was music from Cambodia, so I could talk about our links there. And there was a song in Spanish from El Salvador called 'Profetas' - Prophets - holding together and comparing St John the Baptist and Archbishop Romero. Both went to a martyr's death for speaking God's word, like so many others in the past and in our own living memory, including St Thomas Becket, murdered and martyred in his Cathedral; Archbishop Luwum, Anglican Archbishop in Uganda during the regime of Idi Amin, who was murdered and martyred just a few days before Romero was installed as Archbishop of San Salvador; and Oscar Romero himself, murdered and martyred in the simple hospital chapel. Speaking out for justice is a demand of true holiness. Living and proclaiming God's word calls us to do all we can to bring about here on earth God's promise of justice, healing and freedom when his Kingdom comes.

So often it is through such people that others come to know that God is really with them, and that Jesus is truly Emmanuel, 'God with us'. The poor and oppressed of El Salvador knew God was with

them because their ‘Monsenor’ was at their side, immersed in their life and speaking powerfully on their behalf.

Just as the Word had become flesh in Mary, immersing himself in human life, suffering and death, so Romero was there with them in Jesus’ name, risking his own life to share in theirs.

All of us, each in our own way, are called to do the same – to live the Incarnation we celebrate on the Eve of the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Immersing ourselves with a passionate love in God’s world means working for justice, peace, human rights and freedom for those close at hand and those far away. We can all be inspired by Romero’s joyful love for God and his people, and his readiness to offer his life for them.

Such an offering of our lives is not always easy, as we know from Mary herself at the Annunciation and Romero’s natural fear but gradual acceptance of meeting a violent end. And yet, the words we heard so often in this evening’s readings at Mass, which sum up Romero’s short time as Archbishop, should be ours as well: ‘Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will’ (Psalm), ‘God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will’ (Hebrews), and Mary’s ‘I am the servant of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me’ (St Luke).

Today, we celebrate a great prophet and martyr of our time, one inspired above all by God’s word in the Scriptures, and also by the powerful social teaching of the Catholic Church (especially Pope Pius XI, and Pope Paul VI whose photo he kept by his bedside), one who offered his life in love for God’s people.

Let us pray that we will each do the same, and be together a beacon of justice and peace to our world, so that all may know through us that God is with them, and that he loves them so much that he sent his only Son.