

Romero Anniversary Mass - 24th March 2007: Our Lady's Church, Warwick Street, London.

Reflection by Pat Jones

Several times in recent months, I have had a small experience which has shaken me; in conversations with young people, and in a workshop about spirituality, I have spoken of Archbishop Romero, and found that quite active Catholics knew little or nothing of his story. The generation born after his death in particular are now young adults, and many have never heard of him. His life and death, and the struggle of the Salvadoran people for whom he died, have been so much part of my own formation and such an inspiration when all else fails, that I have tended to take for granted that he is known. But this is not the case.

This makes it all the more important that we gather here today. Our Church lives by memory and hope and by re-telling stories. This is what happens in every eucharist; the dangerous memory of the life and death and rising again of Jesus is told and re-told, to stir us and disturb us and invigorate us. And we in our turn are commissioned to tell to others the story that has been told to us. The same is true for the story of Oscar Romero. For those of us who know the story, whose lives have been affected and whose faith has been shaped in part by his example, it is vital both that we remember and re-tell the story; and that we tell others. The Chief Rabbi yesterday in his Thought for the Day described memory as our satellite navigation system as we make our way across the wilderness of time towards the good society. The memory of Oscar Romero has been given to us but it is not for us alone. It is for the whole Church and the whole world. And it is not just an honouring of the past; we remember today so that we know the direction to take in the future.

Oscar Romero was a priest and bishop whose love for his people who were suffering violence and oppression led him to take their side and to denounce their oppressors. And so he was killed, whilst saying Mass, on this day, 27 years ago. We remember him not just because he was a holy man or a humble priest; not even because he is a saint, even while we wait for the Church to recognise this. It is because he is a **martyr** that his life and death have lasting significance. And his significance is not only within the Church but beyond it, in the public world of politics and power.

The life and death of a holy person, even of a saint, inspires and encourages us; and draws others to the Gospel by its example; but the life and death of a martyr does something more. It reveals to the whole world the structures of sin and evil which operate in a particular situation; and at the same time it proclaims something more powerful; that love can overcome any violence and even death; martyrdom could therefore be described as 'public truth', truth for the whole world, because it tells the truth about what is happening in the world. Martyrs are made when the Gospel message, incarnate in a person, confronts the evil in a particular context; a martyr is someone who contradicts the tyranny of violence and oppression so powerfully that those tyrannical powers, respond by the ultimate act of violence, deliberately taking the life of the one who reveals and resists what they are doing. A martyr's death is paradoxical; it seems like defeat; but in fact, as Oscar Romero recognised in the words he spoke about his own death shortly before it happened, a martyr is one who, though he dies, rises again in the effect his death has on those who are left behind. 'If they kill me', he said, 'I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people. I am not boasting. I say it with the greatest humility.'

In the Church's tradition and teaching, there are two central elements that make a martyr. A martyr is someone who gives his or her life willingly in defence of Christian faith, not actively seeking death but recognising and accepting that the path they follow may lead them there. And secondly, a martyr is someone whose life is taken by oppressors or tyrants who hate that faith. In Romero's death, and many other 20th century examples, we see that classical tradition broadened. The security forces in El Salvador who were responsible for the deaths of thousands of Christians did not necessarily hate the Christian faith as such; but they violently resisted its implications and its claims. The kind of tyrants we have in today's world are different from those of earlier times; they do not persecute Christians because they hate our faith, but because those who struggle for justice and defend human rights get in their way. And so too today's martyrs are different in response; it is not to defend doctrine that they die, but because they see completely and fully what it means to live the same pattern of life as Jesus, in concrete words and action in their particular place. As Jon Sobrino points out, it is not hatred of the faith that brings about their death, but hatred of justice.

This new kind of martyrdom is profoundly challenging. It is powerful in its effect on people; we cannot know how the response to Romero's death affected those who planned and carried out his murder, but we do know what it meant to his people and to so many others around the world. Martyrdom changes the relationship between oppressors and the oppressed, because a new source of power has been born in the martyr's death. Martyrdom makes the body of Christ visible in a new way. William Cavanaugh points out that oppressors know the significance of this. He describes how the repressive government in Chile in the 1970s tortured people to the point of death, leaving them only just alive; and they ensured that the bodies of any they killed were never found. They denied the Church new martyrs, knowing the power of martyrs in their bodies and even in their graves.

It is challenging also for the Church, in its institutional structures and for all of us. Martyrdom implicates the Church as a political actor, by showing so clearly that in situations that violently contradict God's purpose, the Church must make choices, and this cannot be avoided; it is a matter not of politics, but of faithfulness. So martyrs make us uncomfortable. It is no wonder that Pope John Paul advised Archbishop Romero to stick to preaching principles and avoid denunciations, for fear of making mistakes. Romero's response, that there are circumstances in which one must be concrete, because the abuse has been concrete, was characteristic. He loved the Church and was deeply faithful to its teaching; but for him, the Church was first of all the suffering people of El Salvador whom he would not abandon.

The same pattern can be seen in today's readings. Jeremiah's words clearly made people deeply uncomfortable, and so, we heard, his family and others plotted to kill him. With God's help, Jeremiah discovered the plot, which caused him to reflect on his mission and to petition God's vengeance upon them. His response would not have qualified him for martyrdom! And in the passage from John's Gospel, Jesus' teaching is also meeting resistance; some denounced him because of his origins and wanted to arrest him, whilst others wanted to listen and were open to believing what he said. Oscar Romero experienced all these patterns; people wanted to silence him, both outside the Church and within. But he followed Jesus in placing his trust in God alone.

Our purpose today is to remember Oscar Romero, a Servant of God, and to respond afresh to the meaning of his life, and his death as a martyr. We pray to him, for the courage to resist the tyrannies which disfigure our world and oppress our brothers and sisters. It is in

the light he shed on the following of Christ that we can look at the murderous regime in Zimbabwe and the immense courage of Archbishop Ncube, whose voice we have heard again this week; at the oppression of indigenous peoples in Brazil in whose defence, Dorothy Strang, a sister of Notre Dame, was killed, just two years ago. There are still concrete abuses and crucified peoples, and there are faithful Christians, both lay and ordained, who follow the same path of courageous and costly witness. They need our support in exposing the truth of what is happening and calling for justice and the protection of human rights. And we need their example. Remembering Romero re-orientates us to what is happening in our world today, and asks us to pray, to speak, and to act. His life, his love for his people, his faithfulness and ultimately his martyrdom, together make a story we must treasure and remember, and re-tell from one generation to the next. His is the faith of our Fathers that we will celebrate at the end of this Mass; his martyrdom, a renewal of one of the Church's deepest and most powerful traditions.