

Ecumenical Service  
**Archbishop Oscar Romero**

*St Martin in the Fields*

Saturday 21 March

**Sermon of  
Cardinal Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Westminster**

Many of you will have seen the film 'The Passion of the Christ'. You will not have forgotten the scene of Christ being scourged at the pillar. You will vividly recall, as I do, the action of the women appearing at the end of the flagellation who, in grief and love, wipe up from the stone floor the precious blood of Christ. Amidst their tears, they make sure that not a drop of it is lost, such is their love for him, such is their desire to treasure his memory, the signs of his presence among them.

The same happened at the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero. The sisters present at that early morning Mass used cloths to soak up and save the blood of their beloved martyr. Not a drop was to be lost or washed away. In their eyes it was simply too precious.

What lay at the heart of their love for their Archbishop, their devotion to him?

In him they saw a man who, every day, heard the cry of their people, people trapped in poverty and violence. Each day he attended to that cry, he echoed that cry, he responded in action to that cry. He had taken the people to his heart, and they had taken him to theirs. Each day he saw their world through eyes that had cried. Indeed there are many things in our world that can only be seen through eyes that have cried. And many things visible around us, here, today, remain unseen because many eyes do not weep and hearts are not softened with tears. Archbishop Oscar Romero was one with his people, in the harsh reality of their lives, in a shared love and joy. (The photograph on the front of our service booklet shows that so clearly.)

Yet there was a deeper reason for the utter devotion of those sisters to this Archbishop. They knew that in him the cries of the people became a prayer, offered by him every day, most fully in the celebration of the Holy Mass. As Fr John Sobrino wrote: 'The cries of the whole people were transformed into the prayer Archbishop Romero offered to God.' At the end, this prayer was offered in his blood. It was indeed most precious.

Here, then, is our first reflection. If we truly want to imitate Oscar Romero and truly follow his example, then we too, every day, must make the cries of the poor in every part of the world central to our prayer. This is the most radical action we can take, the most profound response we can make to poverty in our midst. This call to prayer is the first call of our baptism, a true fulfilling of our vocation to be a holy people, a nation of priests. We are to offer to God, entrust to God, all that he has given to us, most especially the poor and the weak, those who are dearest to him.

Without this prayer all else that we do will be flat, one-dimensional, without its true roots in love and in faith.

On 23 May, in the city of San Salvador, Oscar Romero will be declared 'Blessed', a martyr for the faith of the Church, faith in Jesus Christ. He died, the Church proclaims, in holiness of life and for one reason: hatred of the faith, hatred of Jesus, hatred of the unfailing love of God, shown in Jesus, which has such a special, preferential place for the poor. This love, in which we place our trusting faith, is the source of the true dignity of every human being, from the first moment of their conception to their natural death. Without recognition of this truth, human dignity has no firm roots. Those who wish to deny that dignity, in their unjust and cruel treatment of others will, sooner or later, detest the faith and love that so uphold that dignity. The dead body of Jesus, on the cross, in his mother's arms, is the most powerful portrayal of the reality and the cost of that love and the opposition it evokes. Similarly, the dead body of Oscar Romero, crumpled at the foot of the altar, the altar on which that same death of Christ is made present every day, is a most powerful and compelling witness to that same overwhelming truth. God loves his people, bestowing on them an innate dignity, especially on those who are denied almost everything else. Today, in the name of this martyr, we resolve again to be upholders of this God-given dignity of every person.

Also today we do well to ponder this truth: well before his martyrdom, Oscar Romero was dead to himself.

This we learn from the remarkable reading we have just heard taken from his Lenten Retreat Notes. This is a strong, tough spirituality, a radical giving of oneself, as an act of will, not a response of the emotions or as a pathway to self-fulfilment. Listen to his choice of words: 'my disposition must be to give my life for God'; 'my oblation'.... 'I want and desire' that 'deliberate determination only to be of greater service and praise to you.'

His focus is always on the Lord. This is his radical conversion, not to causes but to Christ. His pathway is thoroughly Ignatian, the pathway of decision, not ignoring feelings, but always giving first place to the act of deciding, of dedication freed from self-interest. This determination is upheld, by grace, in the face of every obstacle. It is an act of the will: above all else to be one with the heart and will of God made visible in Jesus. This indeed is his radical challenge to you and to me and one we strive to accept afresh in this very special celebration.

Archbishop Romero is an inspiration to many. For that we thank God. Broad coalitions are important. They can be so effective. But on us who understand and treasure these deeper reaches of his heart it is incumbent that we never let the name of Jesus be eclipsed or forgotten. There will be some who will want to reject this name. Yet Jesus is the true source of our vision and our determination. The heroic witness of Archbishop Oscar Romero arises from there. Yes, we gather around this witness, held together and inspired by it. Let us never forget its true source.

Indeed, it is good, as a last step, to reflect further on the unity to which we are called by the witness of this remarkable man, now counted among the 'blessed' in heaven. He makes clear that the way to unity among Christian people is the pathway of a burning desire to be one in Christ, above all else and before all else. Only this can give to us all a united heart. And we must desire to be with Christ where he most loves to be – with the poor in heart and in the heart of the poor.

Listen to some more of Romeo's words: 'The poverty that Jesus Christ here sanctifies is not simply a material poverty, not just having nothing - that is evil. It is a poverty that awakens consciousness, a poverty that accepted the cross and sacrifice, but not out of mere compliance, but because it knows this is God's will. Therefore we become holy according to the degree to which we make poverty a part of our spirituality and to the degree in which we hand ourselves over to the Lord and show our openness to God' (Homily of 17 February 1980). May we all learn to walk that path towards the unity for which Jesus prayed so earnestly.

What do I take to my heart from this remarkable life, the life of our new Blessed? I try to embrace the astonishing rigour and simplicity of his life, the clarity of his eyes that reveals the purity of his heart, a sure window into the holiness of his soul.

I take to heart the powerfully providential fact that he was shot dead not in a university campus, nor in a barrio, nor in a public demonstration, but at the altar, where the deepest part of his heart was always centred. This is the key to understanding him correctly and profoundly.

I take to heart the fact that when he was martyred he was clothed not in the individuality of his personality, nor in the insignia of episcopal office, but in the vestments of a priest. Vestments are always intended to hide a priest's own self, making visible only his ministry in Christ. This is what is most precious about Oscar Romero.

These are what fill my eyes and heart. I hope they do yours too. Then, in thanking God for the holy witness of the Blessed Oscar Romero, we will always hold firm to the creative, redemptive source from which such grace and goodness always flows. Then our contribution too will be well rooted, compassionate and, with God's blessing, a true service of the Kingdom of God in our world today.

Amen.