

Romero Anniversary Mass Easter Monday 24th March 2008: Edinburgh

Today is a pretty unique opportunity for us. If I live to be 100 years of age, I'll never again have the opportunity to celebrate Romero's anniversary in Easter time. In fact, I'd have to live to be 198 years old and reach the year 2160 for this to be possible again! And I don't want to do that! By then I'd like to be talking TO Romero, up there in heaven, not about him, down here in Edinburgh! I suppose that there are not many once in a lifetime events, so I'm going to make the most of this one.

You might wonder why it is important to have the chance to mark this anniversary in Easter. After all, Easter is about resurrection - we hear today the great Gospel account of the faithful women as they experience the resurrection and meet the Risen Jesus. The gospel describes them as being filled with awe and great joy. But by remembering Archbishop Romero we are marking the anniversary of a brutal killing, an assassination, something awful, something of great sadness. It appears to be a contradiction. Awe and great joy at the resurrection, shock and brutality at Romero's death.

In many ways, Lent IS a better time to mark this day. He was killed during Lent. And Lent after all, Holy Week in particular, is a time to reflect on the passion and death of Jesus, the seeming overpowering of good by evil. If we were to look for possible scenario's when good might be seen to be overpowered by evil there is none more horrific than the reality in the details of Romero's death. It was this day, March 24th, 1980, Monday in the 5th week of Lent, and he was celebrating the anniversary mass for the mother of a friend of his, a woman named Dona Sarita. He had read from chapter 12 of the Gospel of John:

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single grain, but if it dies it yields much fruit.

Following that Gospel he preached a homily about the central place of Eucharist in the life of the faithful. What he said at that time, these last words, are well worth repeating, remembering, pondering and living up to: He said;

This holy Mass, this Eucharist, is clearly an act of faith. Our Christian faith shows us that in this moment contention is changed into the body of the Lord who offers himself for the redemption of the world. In the chalice the wine is transformed into the blood that is the price of salvation. May this body broken and this blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain, as Christ did-not for self, but to bring justice and peace to our people. Let us be intimately united then in faith and hope.

At that moment he was shot in the heart with a single bullet, and fell back landing at the foot of the crucifix that stood behind the altar. In fact it was a particularly graphic crucifix, with a huge figure of a bloody and bruised Christ. And Romero lay at his feet. He died within minutes, while his assassin escaped in the confusion. We might say it's a Holy Week scene. But just like Holy Week, it's not the end of the story.

This is why I am delighted to take the chance to uniquely mark an Easter anniversary. In the Triduum of the past three days we recalled with beautiful and powerful liturgy the events of the passion. Good Friday was particularly powerful

and poignant, with the reading of the Passion and the veneration of the cross. But it was not the high point. The brutal killing of Jesus would by now have been long forgotten without the resurrection. The high point for us therefore has to be the Easter Vigil on Saturday night, where we welcomed the risen Christ among us.

And on this Easter Monday we continue this welcoming. So too on this anniversary, and on the 27 anniversaries that have preceded this one, we welcome also the risen Romero. Is this a blasphemy? I hope not. Rather, it's the fulfilment of a prophecy, one made by Romero himself. Two weeks before he was shot he spoke to a Mexican journalist who asked him if he was afraid of death. What he said in reply is the reason I delight in celebrating this mass on Easter Monday:

I have often been threatened with death. I have to say, as a Christian, that I don't believe in death without resurrection: if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. If the threats are carried out, even now, I offer my blood to God for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace of God I don't think I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of liberty and the sign that hope will soon become reality. You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God's church, which is the people, will never perish.

What is the evidence of the Resurrection? The gospel of today is a good example: it's the eye witnesses. Those people who met the risen Lord, and who did not doubt what they experienced. "the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples"! Their experience of Christ was overwhelming, profound, unshakeable. So profound was their experience that on the strength of it hundreds of millions of us believe today. And in turn, we have had our own experience of the risen Lord, our own experience of Christ alive in some or other way, real and tangible.

We might then ask what is the evidence of Romero's resurrection? Once again, 'witness' is the key. We just heard Romero say it himself: "If they kill me I will rise again in the Salvadoran people." This is what one poor farmer said of him:

He made me feel like a person. Because he loved people like me, and he didn't act like we made him sick. He talked to us, he touched us, he asked us questions. He had confidence in us. You could see it in his eyes that he cared about me.

And not only the Salvadoran people but people all over the world. This is what Pope Benedict said of him:

I have no doubt he will be beatified... He was certainly a great witness for the faith, a man of great Christian virtue who was committed to peace and against dictatorship.

We may wonder these many years later why he was killed in the first place. Last year we had the honour of welcoming his friend and vicar general, Monsignor Ricardo Urioste here to Lauriston. He is very clear in answer to this.

Archbishop Romero was killed because of what he preached and what he said. But he never said anything that was not consistent with the gospel and with the

teachings of the church. If these have been given to us, it is clearly so that they be carried out.

So there it is, he was killed for living the gospel and proclaiming the teaching of the church, with all it says about human dignity. Many disciples, from Peter and Andrew, through the early martyrs, up to Romero and even beyond, have died for this same simple action of living the gospel. At the very least, then, we have a duty to do the same, so their deaths cannot be said to be meaningless.

Let's leave the final words to Romero himself, speaking in his weekly Sunday homily only three weeks before his death:

Don't think, brothers, that our dead have left us. Their heaven, their eternal recompense, makes them more perfect in love. They are still loving the same causes that they died for. That means that in El Salvador this liberating force not only counts those who remain living, but also counts those who they wanted to kill who are more present than before in the people.

On this Easter Day we know without doubt that Jesus has not left us, and we know that Romero has not left us. We give thanks for our Easter faith which calls us to be witnesses and disciples. And we give thanks for the Easter faith of Archbishop Romero, which truly did see him rise in the people, not only the people of El Salvador but people all over the world.

Chris Boles SJ
24 March 2008