

SERMON FOR LENT 4 | 27.03.22

Joshua 5: 9-12; 2 Corinthians 15: 1-3, 11-32; St Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Most years we keep Mothering Sunday on this, the 4th week of Lent, a very old tradition going right back to medieval days when its proximity to the first Quarter Day on March 25th gave rise to the tradition of giving domestic workers a rare chance of returning home to their mother's. But as we have our 1st Sunday All Age celebration next Sunday (Passion Sunday) I thought that, at least for those who remembered to put their clocks forward last night, we might go in a slightly different direction today.

Because this week provides another significant date in the calendar. It was on 24th March 1980 that the El Salvadorean Archbishop, Oscar Romero, was assassinated as he said Mass in a Hospital chapel. He had led the Church in his country for just three years – but three of the most turbulent years for the South American continent in the 20th century.

And as our guiding Gospel, we have one of Jesus' most familiar parables: the story of the Prodigal Son who squanders the whole of his inheritance.

Thanks to Sergio, we were able to watch, in the most graphic way possible, the story of Oscar Romero's ministry as it was the subject for last Friday's night's Lenten film. It was an outstanding piece of drama and the use of native extras gave it additional impact. We were spared nothing of the brutality with which the El Salvadorean government, police and army, hounded and killed the peasant population in a political system which was still completely feudal. The utter powerlessness of the poor to challenge the indifference of the ruling elite was graphically portrayed in scene after scene as we became aware of repeated torture, rapes, abductions and murder. Watching soldiers spraying bullets into crowds or a captain destroying the Blessed Sacrament in a Church with a blast of his sub machine gun will live in my memory for a very long time.

Yet the bigger narrative was the education of Romero, a rather ineffectual academic who was suddenly promoted to the job of Archbishop because the military – 'advising' the Vatican – were sure he wouldn't rock the boat. All this violence was light years away from his experience; surely he wouldn't do more than pay lip service to the need for civil rights and social justice?

Little by little Romero's conservatism and his desire to be even-handed is worn away – not least after the murder of one of his friends, Fr Rusilio Grande, a Jesuit, shot up by a military patrol as he drove a young family home in his battered old jeep. How, we asked, could they do such a thing?

Having watched the film, I spent much of yesterday reading quotes from the sermons and broadcasts Oscar Romero delivered in those last three years. Collected and translated by James Brockman under the title *'The Church is all of you'*, it seems to me that what Romero was championing was not just limited to the appalling situation in which he found himself – it speaks to us as a Church today too, especially in the light of the Prodigal Son story.

So I want to share with you, if I may, some of his more famous sayings: but first let me remind you of the Prodigal Son parable we have just read.

It is hard not to feel that this younger son was simply a spoilt brat. He has had everything given to him on a plate and yet it still wasn't enough. Clearly he had no respect for his father or the home which has been his base all these years. He desperately wanted to get away from such cloying familiarity - which he does as quickly as he possibly can; until his money runs out and he is entirely spent up.

It was only when he has absolutely nothing left that his father's parental care – and his old home – become so desirable again. It was only as he fed on pig-swill in some distant country, lonelier than he has ever been in his life, that he began to dream of what those familiar surroundings felt like. He wanted nothing more than 'to be home' – and yet he was not stupid: he was only too well aware that he had messed up to such a degree that there could not, surely, be any way back. Who would have time for such selfishness and crass stupidity?

So how does Romero turn this story from teenage rebellion into something each of us needs to face? He begins with these words, *There are many things that can only be learned through eyes that have cried*. That is to say, for most of us we have to learn many of the lessons of life the hard way. There are no easy short cuts that avoid our pride and our selfishness being brought face to face with the harsh reality of the world and its troubles.

For what Romero had to contend with in San Salvador was a government, a military, a police force and a ruling elite which had simply closed its eyes to the suffering of the landless poor. And in that context the only institution that could break the cycle was the Church. So he preached, *A Church that doesn't provoke any crises, a Gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what Gospel is that?*

In one of the early scenes, an opposition group dumps the archbishop unceremoniously into the middle of a wasteland rubbish dump.

It is lashing with rain and he spots a family in the dark crouching on the ground, with just enough plastic to cover them as they huddle together. Romero had never seen such poverty. And yet, whatever his status, he was drenched too. Now he knows. Equally, with no money left, the Prodigal Son boy knows what it feels like to be utterly abandoned. That wasteland unsettled Romero; it got under his skin. Only now could he make the jump from the Gospel he knew so well to the plight of the poor in front of him; but what was to be done next? *There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.*

So with a mix of relief and fear for what will happen, the Prodigal Son picks himself up, realising that he has no choice. But what will he find when he returns home? Endless recriminations, a bevy of ‘I told you so’s’?

For Romero, the Father figure – looking out endlessly from the roof his house for the Son who was lost - is a picture of the Church. *The only way for the Church to save the world he says, is when it calls us not to go it alone ... but to respond to the way God, the builder of a reign of justice, of love and of peace, is already there, drawing us to himself – and to one another. As in the Book of Genesis: It is not right for man to be alone.*

Just as the Son thought he could live most happily when he had cut himself off from everyone else so the elite of El Salvador thought that they could save themselves by denouncing anyone with a scrap of compassion as a Communist. To which Romero thunders: *One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us. The truth is that it is those that fend off danger who will ultimately lose their lives.*

Like many people called to lead churches out of this pandemic, I have found myself deeply concerned for those who haven’t made it through; those we were frequently in touch with after baptisms and First Communion, people who have simply disappeared over the last two years. They don’t reply to text and emails and it is all too obvious that the hard-won habit of making it to Church on a Sunday morning had slipped in favour of other things – or of nothing in particular. So when a young woman who had started to come to St James’ talked to me on Friday night of how she had found us just too small a Church and she was returning to a bigger one up the road, I naturally felt a bit fed up. As the Father would have been when his son took the cash and ran; as the Church in El Salvador was entitled to feel in the face of such appalling tyranny.

But Romero sees things differently: *Let us not be disheartened when human failings seem to make the accomplishments of God’s plans impossible. God makes use even of*

our errors, even of our sins, in order to reveal the truth. The Church must continue to open her arms to those who are lost...

And that is precisely what the Prodigal's father did when the bedraggled son finally wended his way back home. As he said to the older son, full of resentment that such a fuss is being made of his younger brother: *we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead – and has come back to life. St Paul has it right in today's second reading: from now on we regard no one from a human point of view; if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. It is through Christ that we are reconciled to one another.*

So it was that, after the Cantallini concert last night, the two girls who had been making life so very difficult for us over the last six months (to the point where we had to close St James') came into Church to apologise – and to do it very well. Apparently, after they had been identified, their school had read them the riot act in no uncertain terms and so, last night, they simply asked that we draw a line under what happened and start again. I genuinely thought I would never get the chance to say this but it was wonderful to see them there and to hear what they had to say. As Romero wrote: *Beautiful is the moment in which we understand that we are no more than instruments of God; we live only as long as God wants us to live; we can only do as much as God makes us able to do; we are only as intelligent as God would have us be.*

Hard though it is, may we never feel that in any situation, we have been abandoned by our heavenly Father. As the archbishop wrote: *We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.*

But we can't be glib about this difficult journey that we have begun together. Whatever this film depiction of Oscar Romero was able to convey, what it reminded me was the cost that each of us needs to pay if we are to be ambassadors for Christ, leading people through their personal

Lent, from death to life, from Good Friday to an Easter Resurrection. As he said, *As God directs, I may need to lay down my life for the freedom of my people. If that is so, a bishop will die. But the Church will never perish. I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again - in the fruits of these people's lives.* > May God grant each of us the willingness to accept personal rejection so that we too can bring home all those who feel lost: as Joshua did in Gilgal, Romero in El Salvador, so you and I can do - here.