

5th Sunday of Lent, 17 March 2024

Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

Homily: Fr. Ken

This coming week we commemorate the forty-fourth anniversary of the assassination and martyrdom of St. Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador. His life offers us a key to understanding the scripture readings for today's Mass.

The priests and people who personally knew Archbishop Romero tell us that he was totally dedicated to being a pastor and servant of God. His area of growth in holiness, like ours, was to amplify his perspective, to understand with the heart of God.

Archbishop Romero seldom ventured outside his country. But approximately one month and a half prior to his assassination he traveled to Europe—one day in Rome to see Pope John Paul II, and two days in Belgium at the Catholic University of Louvain to receive an honorary doctorate. At the time I was completing my Ph.D., and I had been elected doctoral student representative. The archbishop gave his speech in Spanish, but everyone had printed Dutch and French translations. During the reception that followed, I was introduced to Archbishop Romero as a doctoral student from L.A. He looked straight at me and asked directly: "What is the Church in Los Angeles doing for the poor?" That was Archbishop Romero—always conscious, always aware of the plight of the poor. Archbishop Romero was officially proclaimed a saint by Pope Francis in 2018.

In the scripture readings for today, Jeremiah the prophet assures his people that their infidelity—bad as it was—has not led God to abandon them, but rather to reform them. Instead of giving them rules to follow, God wants to infuse their hearts with the fire of divine love. This is not a new covenant, but rather an offer of grace to understand God's will in a new way—from the inside out.

When the covenant is written on their hearts, they will share the very passion of God. Of course, while this may sound like a wonderful deal, we should be aware that it is also extremely costly.

And that is the point from the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. There we hear that Jesus had to struggle to live his mission. And the struggle was not just a passing moment. The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus prayed with shouts and tears, as a beggar before God. The author says that Jesus was fully human; his life had to be lived out in his own personal history.

This leads directly to the Gospel scene where Jesus teaches his disciples about how listening with his heart led him to fulfill God's will. Jesus explains that his moment of glory is about to arrive, and he does not hesitate to say that he knows what it will cost.

What Jesus will face down and defeat is everything motivated by death: both the desire to kill and the urge to escape mortality and suffering. Jesus knows that the reality of death seems to circumscribe life, and can lead us to believe that we must grasp everything we can while we have the chance.

Fear of death and human limitations is what leads us to cling to anything we can get our hands on, to seek the false immortality of power, fame, or fortune. Such grasping is what Jesus calls "loving the life of this world", and this is what he calls us to reject.

Today we look to St. Oscar Romero for a more contemporary expression of the love of God and love of neighbor that guided Jesus. Archbishop Romero's core desire was to love and serve God through his vocation. That never changed. What changed was his perspective. Becoming Archbishop of San Salvador threw him into a new reality and a new consciousness.

Like Jesus, Archbishop Romero confronted tragic violence, brought dramatically to his consciousness by the murder of the poor and their priests. That suffering irretrievably altered his perspective. He learned to listen and to act: listening to the cries of the victims, in the light of the Gospel, then acting in the name of God.

Thus, he came to the ultimate test of his faith: Did he believe in the love of God's poor and persecuted, enough to risk everything?

We know the answer. His love of people who were poor, his faithfulness to the Gospel, led him to confront the people who had become captive to their own wealth and power. Risking his life day after day, he spoke out and walked with his people. Archbishop Romero gave living witness to what it means to hate the evil of the world. His life became a walking, talking profession of faith.

Nothing could have been more fitting than his martyrdom during the very Eucharistic celebration that proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ.

All of this leaves us with one question: Are we willing to risk the cost of having God's law written on our hearts?

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