

Call to Action

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

"Discipleship is not intended as a soft option or the guarantee of an easy life. There is a cost, and disciples must be willing to pay the cost." (Anthony Gittins)

Mission is a verb calling for a disposition towards action. In Christian terms it describes a lifestyle characterised by boundary-breaking. Jesus came to break down boundaries of privilege and segregation, to include rather than exclude, to welcome actively rather than admit reluctantly. Authentic Christian spirituality is expressed in living from the conviction that God sustains and restores relationships. This calls us to radical engagement with the world, with social justice and with the rest of humanity.

Jesus declared that he was sent to the poor and needy in general, although he had to deliberately seek out, encounter and be encountered by actual people in specific circumstances. Our good intentions are not enough – the call to Christian discipleship is to encourage and support one another in a generous response to the Gospel and the call of the Spirit. The image of Jesus as gentle, meek and mild does not match the Jesus of the Gospels who is a disturbing figure. His boundary-breaking ways provide courage to those willing to follow in his footsteps.

Pope Francis is calling all those in different fields of mission to join him in cultivating seeds of change, to effect a mission of love and mercy. Leadership for this mission demands that we become risk-takers for the sake of the Gospel, pushing the boundaries of love and inclusion. For Pope Francis, the inclusion of the poor in society is inextricably linked with peace. His call is to be a church that brings the love of God to the world through words, attitudes and actions rather than a church standing on the sidelines of the struggle for justice. Every Christian is called to work for the liberation and promotion of the poor, enabling their full participation in society, working to eliminate structural causes of poverty and promoting integral development alongside daily acts of solidarity.

We have a choice to refuse to accept a moral deterioration of the present and to follow the path of the prophets – to find the courage to echo those who spoke the voice and vision of God for the world.

Through his ministry in San Salvador Oscar Romero enfolded or 'made incarnate' the option for the poor. During three dramatic years as archbishop, Romero became visible to the wider world through his legendary preaching to a nation engulfed in explosive tensions and violence. In a country wracked with human rights abuses, enveloped in lies and cover-up and edging every day closer to civil war, Archbishop Romero fearlessly spoke the truth. He listened to the poor tell their stories. He took on the wealthy landowners for their exploitation of seasonal workers. He took on the military for their torture, killings and terrorisation of the rural population. This brought down persecution on the Church and six priests and dozens of catechists were killed prior to his own assassination.

Parallels have been drawn between Romero's three years as archbishop and the three years of the public life of Jesus. The preaching, the teaching, the prayer and solitude. The closeness to the poor, the tender love of the vulnerable and destitute, the courage and resolution, the insults hurled, the pharisaic plotting against him, the doubts and the fears, the death threats and the public execution.

In 1977 there was a Gethsemane experience for Romero. As he prayed beside the body of the murdered priest, Rutilio Grande, he realised that if he were to follow this through to its final consequences it would, as he wrote, "put me on the road to Calvary". And he assented; he made a fundamental option for the poor and it took him to his martyrdom.

Romero was once asked to explain that strange phrase, 'option for the poor'. He replied: **"I offer you this by way of example. A building is on fire and you're watching it burn, standing and wondering if everyone is safe. Then someone tells you that your mother and your sister are inside that building. Your attitude changes completely. You're frantic; your mother and sister are burning and you'd do anything to rescue them even at the cost of getting charred. That's what it means to be truly committed. If we look at poverty from the outside, as if we're looking at a fire, that's not to opt for the poor, no matter how concerned we may be. We should get inside as if our own mother and sister were burning. Indeed it's Christ who is there, hungry and suffering."**



Romero spoke about his death and those around him tried to persuade him to have protection or a bodyguard. His response was simple: "Why should the shepherd have protection when his sheep are still prey to wolves?" The threats became so intense; a fever existed. Romero knew he was going to die. He accepted it with great equanimity. He prepared himself and went like a lamb to the slaughter.

Following his assassination the war became unstoppable and during twelve years claimed over 70,000 lives.

What should remembering Archbishop Romero mean today? From a Christian point of view 'remembering' means something active. The fundamental Christian model is 'Do this in memory of me'. For the Church to remember Archbishop Romero must first mean to continue his work and imitate that option for the poor which he embraced and his life and ministry epitomised. And like him to struggle with the paradoxes and conflicts that such commitment throws up for us.

<http://www.catholicsocialteaching.org.uk/themes/community-participation/stories/oscar-romero-option-poor/>



It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing 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 the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.

- St Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador

