

When we read through history, time and time again we can look at moments in the past but even in the present and wonder how such things are allowed to happen. Whether we are talking about the holocaust, slavery, the victims of Communism, abortion, or so many other things, sometimes it can be tempting to not have a whole lot of hope in the world. But a look closer will reveal that for all the evil in the world, there are so many people who are the things we hear of in the Gospel; the salt of the earth; the light of the world; the city set on a hill. People who are agents for good, people who aren't willing to be passive in the face of evil. People who are willing to be that light that guides people to the truth, no matter what the cost.

Recently in October of 2018, canonized was Archbishop Oscar Romero, who had every reason to be fearful of what was going on around him in his home country of El Salvador. But, as one who took seriously the Gospel, he decided to live out the words that we hear proclaimed by our Lord today at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

In 1980, in the midst of a civil war that had broken out in El Salvador that would last until 1992 and claim the lives of 75,000, the soon-to-be-assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero promised history that life, not death, would have the last word. "I do not believe in death without resurrection," he said. "If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people."

The night before he was murdered while celebrating Mass, Romero said on the radio: "I would like to appeal in a special way to the men of the army, and in particular to the troops of the National Guard, the police, and the garrisons. Brothers, you belong to our own people. You kill your own brother peasants; and in the face of an order to kill that is given by a man, the law of God that says 'Do not kill!' should prevail.

"No soldier is obliged to obey an order counter to the law of God. No one has to comply with an immoral law. It is the time now that you recover your conscience and obey its dictates rather than the command of sin. . . . Therefore, in the name of God, and in the name of this long-suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven every day more tumultuous, I beseech you, I beg you, I command you! In the name of God: 'Cease the repression!'"

Simultaneously, Romero had eloquently upheld the gospel and effectively signed his own death warrant.

When he was appointed archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, Bishop Romero was considered a very "safe" choice. He had served as auxiliary bishop there for four years before his three years as bishop of Santiago de Maria.

Oscar's father wanted him to be a carpenter—a trade for which he demonstrated some talent. Seminary classes in El Salvador preceded his studies at Rome's Gregorian University and his ordination in 1942. After earning a doctorate in ascetical theology, he

returned home and became a parish priest and later rector of an interdiocesan seminary.

Three weeks after his appointment as archbishop, Romero was shaken by the murder of his good friend Jesuit Father Rutilio Grande, a vigorous defender of the rights of the poor. Five more priests were assassinated in the Archdiocese of San Salvador during Romero's years as its shepherd.

When a military junta seized control of the national government in 1979, Archbishop Romero didn't become silent. His weekly radio sermons, broadcast throughout the country, were regarded by many as the most trustworthy source of news available.

Romero gave his last homily on March 24. Moments before a sharpshooter felled him, reflecting on scripture, he said, "One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives." The homily, however, that sealed his fate took place the day before when he took the terrifying step of publicly confronting the military.

Romero begged for international intervention. He was alone. The people were alone. In 1980 the war claimed the lives of 3,000 per month, with cadavers clogging the streams, and tortured bodies thrown in garbage dumps and the streets of the capitol weekly. With one exception, all the Salvadoran bishops turned their backs on him, going so far as to send a secret document to Rome reporting him, accusing him of being "politicized" and of seeking popularity.

Unlike them, Romero had refused to ever attend a government function until the repression of the people was stopped. He kept that promise winning him the enmity of the government and military, and an astonishing love of the poor majority.

Romero was a surprise in history. The poor never expected him to take their side and the elites of church and state felt betrayed. He was a compromise candidate elected to head the bishop's episcopacy by conservative fellow bishops. He was predictable, an orthodox, pious bookworm who was known to criticize the progressive liberation theology clergy so aligned with the impoverished farmers seeking land reform. But an event would take place within three weeks of his election that would transform the ascetic and timid Romero.

The new archbishop's first priest, Rutilio Grande, was ambushed and killed along with two parishioners. Grande was a target because he defended the peasant's rights to organize farm cooperatives. He said that the dogs of the big landowners ate better food than the campesino children whose fathers worked their fields.

The night Romero drove out of the capitol to Paisnal to view Grande's body and the old man and seven year old who were killed with him, marked his change. In a packed country church Romero encountered the silent endurance of peasants who were facing rising terror. Their eyes asked the question only he could answer: Will you stand with us

as Rutilio did? Romero's "yes" was in deeds. The peasants had asked for a good shepherd and that night they received one.

Romero already understood the church is more than the hierarchy, Rome, theologians or clerics—more than an institution—but that night he experienced the people as church. "God needs the people themselves," he said, "to save the world . . . The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of hand-outs from governments or from the churches, but when they themselves are the masters and protagonists of their own struggle for liberation."

Romero's great helplessness was that he could not stop the violence. Within the next year some 200 catechists and farmers who watched him walk into that country church were killed. Over 75,000 Salvadorans would be killed, one million would flee the country, another million left homeless, constantly on the run from the army—and this in a country of only 5.5 million. All Romero had to offer the people were weekly homilies broadcast throughout the country, his voice assuring them, not that atrocities would cease, but that the church of the poor, themselves, would live on.

"If some day they take away the radio station from us . . . if they don't let us speak, if they kill all the priests and the bishop too, and you are left a people without priests, each one of you must become God's microphone, each one of you must become a prophet."

On March 23 Romero walked into the fire. He openly challenged an army of peasants, whose high command feared and hated his reputation. Ending a long homily broadcast throughout the country, his voice rose to breaking, "Brothers, you are from the same people; you kill your fellow peasant . . . No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God . . ."

There was thunderous applause; he was inviting the army to mutiny. Then his voice burst, "In the name of God then, in the name of this suffering people I ask you, I beg you, I command you in the name of God: stop the repression."

Romero's murder was a savage warning. Even some who attended Romero's funeral were shot down in front of the cathedral by army sharpshooters on rooftops. To this day no investigation has revealed Romero's killers. What endures is Romero's promise.

Days before his murder he told a reporter, "You can tell the people that if they succeed in killing me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully, they will realize they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish."

The war would drag on for another decade, but his words would inspire people with hope. And while we are far removed from what happened in El Salvador, his words apply to us because we are the Church, and each one of us must be God's microphone. We must be God's prophet. When Christians aren't, it's what allows evil to triumph.

Jesus in the Gospel speaks of salt, light and a city on a hill. Salt would preserve the meat from going bad; light illuminates all upon which it shines, and a city on a hill was what people would look at to get a sense of direction as to where they were going. Saint Oscar Romero was these things to his people, and it's worth thinking about how we can be the same too.

With respect to salt, as the salt preserves the meat, how do we preserve the faith? As I mentioned last week, we have to look at how we live out our faith, not dismissing things we do that are wrong but trying to become a better people. When we make good moral choices, when we go to Mass, when we pray, all of these things are like adding salt to the meat. So it's important to keep our faith fresh. Baptism brought us into the Church and links us with Jesus, but as we grow we have to live that out daily by growing closer to Jesus through learning the faith and being people of prayer, and letting the light of God's love shine on us revealing the good and the bad so that we see both, and use God's love to overcome our shortcomings.

With respect to being a light to the world and a city on the hill to guide others, we have to look at our how we live our lives and our willingness to testify to the truth, as both have such a huge impact on our families and others.

Think for instance of the family. If kids see parents using hurtful language in arguments, if they see a parent or older sibling looking at objectifying images of the human body on a computer, if Mass is something that is routinely skipped, and if they are told sports and school are ahead of God, what are they going to learn? But if kids see their parents praying, being loving toward one another, and experience going to Mass with them, they can learn so much. The same is true for the larger world too; actions speak so loudly. Because of people praying at Planned Parenthood, lives have been saved and hearts have been converted. Because of Pope Francis holding the hand of a little girl with down syndrome at a speech he was giving, washing the feet of those in prison on Holy Thursday, or gently hugging and kissing a disfigured man, people are more aware of the dignity of the human person. Because of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus, people could see that racism is wrong. These things of course do not eliminate evil, but they do change hearts and minds - and sometimes we forget that our conduct, in the office, on the road, in home, at kids sporting events, everywhere we go, does so much to be a light to others.

Lastly, this must be backed up with words too. Bishop Romero was on the airwaves and refused to be silent, even though doing so could have very well saved his life. But he knew he had to take a stand against injustice. Sometimes we can be fearful to speak the truth to people around us or to the greater world. And as I've said before, this doesn't entail getting into someone's face and shaming them. But if someone isn't made aware of how they are treating others, things they are saying, if they are drinking too heavily, if someone is never invited to Mass, or if we go around being fearful of offending someone because we don't want to talk to them about what the Church teaches and why, or make them feel bad how will they learn the truth if no one is willing

to speak it to them? We cannot fear being disliked, gossiped about or confrontation when our conscience tells us that we need to testify to the truth.

Despite the evil that can happen in this world and always will, we must never forget the power of love and good is so much greater. And deep down in people, we see that good come out time and time again in how people care for one another and so often choose the good. The problem is it's so easy for people to get lost through bad influences, through a culture that can say anything goes, or through a series of bad decisions, or simply not ever being taught the truth. So may we as Christians not be afraid to proclaim our faith in the world rather than keeping it to ourselves, remembering we aren't here just for our own salvation, but for the salvation of the world - so like Saint Oscar Romero, let us be the salt, the light, the city set on a hill.