

Good Friday Sermon 2010, Ron Kolanowski St. James' Preston

"I have been frequently threatened with death. As a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people."

These are the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Oscar Romero was a Salvadoran and a Christian. Born into a poor and faithful family he was ordained a priest in Rome in 1942. Throughout his career he was immersed in the peace and reconciliation messages of the Gospel. He opened his Episcopal residence to war refugees. He listened to their stories, he cried with them. After his appointment as Archbishop in 1977 his priests received death threats; they began to be killed. He knew their stories He wept for them. He began to see that reconciliation and peacemaking require the presence of justice and that the truth about oppression of the people had to be told. **Oscar Romero spoke truth to power.** Thirty years a week ago Wednesday, while standing at the altar of a crowded chapel in the hospital in which he lived those forces of power—backed by the U.S. government—killed him. (T)

Jesus says to Pilate, *"Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."* Pilate asked him, *"What is truth?"*

Oscar Romero, one who belonged to the truth, who listened to the voice of Jesus, spoke this truth to power and was murdered. (T)

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In the summers of 1999 and 2000 David, a then 70-year old Congregational minister came to Washington, DC as part of the Jubilee Project for world debt relief. His form of witness was to be on a hunger strike. For nearly 60 days each summer, David, a tall, already thin man, fasted from food and walked the halls of the U.S. Congress to plead for debt relief that cripples many developing countries around the world.

As he fasted and became weaker he needed a place to live that was close to the Senate office buildings—that's how we came to know him—for David lived with Art and me those summers.

He would begin each day with three hours of prayer before a crucifix mounted on his bedroom wall. He would take his salt water and slowly make his way up to Capitol Hill where he met all day with Members of Congress. He would return home around 5:00p.m. and pray some more.

After a couple of weeks I asked him, *“Why do you choose to fast as a witness for debt relief?”* David, in a quite voice said to me, *“The members of Congress need to see what the face of starvation looks like.”*

With his own body he spoke truth to power—the truth of what happens to people on the margins who are exploited so that we in the West can satisfy our desire for cheap goods. In speaking truth to power David got members of Congress to take on his fast that accelerated passage of legislation that relieved hundreds of millions of dollars in Third World debt.

The story of Good Friday is the story of the consequences of speaking truth to power. The story catalogues Jesus' suffering as the consequences for being faithful to his identity as God's agent. Jesus embodies a God-given commission in the midst of imperial power and transforms societal structures and norms.

The passion narrative holds within it the rich kernels of the revolutionary struggles of the colonized Jews against the powers of oppression exerted by Rome and their Jewish upper-class collaborators. The hopes of the marginalized for liberation get dashed not only in the lynching of the leader of the revolution but also in the telling of the story. The liberating and revolutionary story has been all too often reduced to an inner religious struggle devoid of its political overtones. (T)

As David was ending his fast, nearly at the point of no return, he said he always breaks his fast with communion and wanted a home Eucharist. While the priests were unable to come to our house, I picked up consecrated bread and wine from church for a service at our home. As we gathered in my living room David came down the stairs carrying something. He said to me, "I want you to officiate at this service and I want you to wear this stole." I said, "David, I am not ordained, I cannot wear a stole." He said to me, "Oscar Romero have me this stole and it has been worn by the officiant each time I have broken my fast." And lifting it above me head, he set this stole of Oscar Romero on my shoulders.

In March 1980 Archbishop Romero said, *“If they ever take our radio, suspend our newspaper, silence us, put to death all of us priests, bishops included, and you are left alone—a people without priests, -- then each of you will have to be God’s microphone. Each of you will have to be a messenger, a prophet. The church will exist as long as one baptized person is left alive.”*

You and I—as priests through our baptism are called to speak truth to power for God. Speaking truth is a dangerous thing. You and I are called to me misunderstood, alone, mocked, called fools, because of the one who spoke truth to power out of love for us—because we belong to the truth. **You and I are called to wear the stole of Archbishop Romero—to carry the cross of Christ—to witness to the truth.**

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”