



JESUIT
INSTITUTE
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Homily 14th Sunday Ordinary Time – Year B

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Imagine, if you will, that you are a visionary archbishop campaigning for human rights in your country. Not only does your vision rooted in the gospel cause you to be hated and feared by the dictatorial regime, parts of your own church, including most of its bishops, have turned against you. Worse still, there is a strong sense that both have poisoned your reputation with the current, very anti-communist Pope in Rome – the latter having been swayed by their allegations of your communist sympathies, or very least that you are naively furthering the cause of Marxism in your country. Imagine too that after your death, although many at home have called you a saint since you were martyred by a paramilitary death squad, and although you are already listed as a martyr by the Lutheran and Anglican Church – the latter having erected a statue of you over one of the doors of Westminster Abbey – it takes more than thirty years for your church to recognise it.

I am referring, of course, to Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. *Saint Oscar*, as of a few years ago. Officially. But for many, since after his death on March 24th 1980, *San Oscar de las Americas, Obispo y Martiro* [Saint Oscar of the Americas, Bishop and Martyr]. But I could, with a few changes to the biography, be speaking of many such figures around the world, including Archbishop Denis Hurley of South Africa.

There is a dynamic in such situations, with obvious variables such as martyrdom, marital state, denomination, or nature of ministry allowed. One, these folk all have the fire of the prophet in their hearts, an urge to proclaim the good news of God's reign. How they do it may vary. How they speak too. But the message of renewal – the message of Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus – is the same.

Second, they experience opposition, misunderstanding and attack. From various sides, but not least from within their own community. "How dare he, I thought he was one of us". "I know her family, where she grew up. I cannot believe she is speaking like that." This may even come from within one's own religious community, who are quite cosy with the old-time religion, cosy with its relationship to the state, or who simply find the often harsh words of the prophet unsettling, subversive or heretical.

Strangely enough, it is often those outside these circles who first value the voice and vision of the prophet. They are honoured and acknowledged for their work outside their homes, their congregations and even their countries. Meanwhile, it is often the case that the prophet is driven to the margins of their society.

Third, many prophets experience what Paul calls a 'thorn in the flesh'. Apart from the thorns in the flesh provided by opponents – which at its extreme might end up as an actual sword or bullet in the flesh – this might be something internal to the prophet - a weakness of character, a fault, even sometimes a struggle with sin itself. This could be an addiction, a psychological struggle with feelings of pointlessness, even doubts about one's mission. (On the latter, such doubt is possibly a good thing – after all, the line between a fanatic and a prophet is in the latter's case the readiness to ask 'Could I be wrong?').

No one really knows what Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was. There's loads of speculation among biblical scholars, but the truth is we don't know. But it really doesn't matter. The fact that Paul, who was nothing if not confident in his sense of God's mission for him, and by extension almost every prophet before and after him, had to endure some kind of obstacle should be a source of hope.

To us. In our calling to ministry in whatever shape or form it takes. In our calling to prophecy. How many of us in the course of our work have not in the very least asked ourselves, "What's the point?" as everything we do seems to get harder, as people – including those close to us – seem to question or second guess us, or simply write us off before we start because – in their words – "We *know* who he or she really is!"

Today we have a few models to look to with hope.

Ezekiel – who knows that his mission will be an uphill battle.

Paul – who accepts his thorn in the flesh and carries on regardless.

And Jesus, who finds no success at home, who reminds us that the prophet is unwelcome in his own family and country and then proceeds to take his mission further the wider world.

They and others who transcend the obstacles should remind us that we not only can continue in our mission but that we must.