



The Daily Martyrdom of Averting Evil

Homily from Fr. Martin Newell cp, on August 28th 2016, Dominic's Day Celebration, at the Passionist Shrine at St Anne's and Blessed Dominic's Church, Sutton, St Helen's, Lancashire

(First Reading: Isaiah 53:1-12, Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:16-21)

About ten years ago, I was cycling along a canal in Hackney, east London. It was getting dark as a young man stepped in front of me, making me stop. Then he and three other teenagers started to demand my mobile phone. I didn't give it to them. If they had seen it they probably wouldn't have wanted it anyway, as it was old and battered. I didn't say anything, but one of them started to hit me over the head with a piece of wood. I fell over with the bike, and covered my head to protect it from the blows. I didn't try to fight or argue or say anything about my phone. After a while they stopped. I got up. Just as I was about to go, I got angry and swore at them. So they started again, until they saw someone was coming and ran off, with nothing to show for their efforts. I was shaken, my glasses were broken, but I wasn't badly hurt.

I have been reminded of that experience by reading about Dominic Barberi, and how he calmly and peacefully put up with having stones thrown at him on his walks from Aston Hall into Stone, even to the extent of picking up a stone that had hit him, kissing it, and putting it in his pocket. If I'd had his self discipline and love for those attacking me, physically and verbally, instead of swearing at them, if I had been able to better embody the words of Isaiah in today's first reading, "he was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth", I would have been better off.

Those words of Isaiah in today's first reading, we usually apply to Jesus in his Passion. But knowing Blessed Dominic's life and witness, we can also apply these words to him:

"Who could believe what we have seen ?

He was like a root in arid ground – the arid ground of England?

without beauty, without majesty

despised and rejected by many

A man of sorrows, familiar with suffering – his own, as well as that of others.

Yet ours were the sorrows he bore, ours the sins he carried

On him lies a punishment that brings us peace"

This is true of Dominic especially in his early days in England, when he was persecuted and attacked, including having those stones thrown at him. But his love shone through. He showed his willingness to suffer for what he believed in when he picked up and kissed that stone. He showed his love by his gentleness, even in the face of provocation, and by his kind words and openness to the goodness in everyone, even those he strongly disagreed with. Like Jesus, he did not act in revenge, or use force to defend himself. He showed his love by his dedicated care for the poor and the victims of the cholera epidemic, even at risk to his own life.

It should be no surprise to us that Dominic's life fits so well with these words of Isaiah, and the life and Passion of Jesus, because Dominic was steeped in them. From his own writings it is clear that Dominic was willing and even eager to take on the suffering of the cross for the sake of the Gospel. He was eager to do as Jesus says in today's Gospel reading, "take up your cross and follow me".

The question for us is, are we willing and eager to do the same? Are we willing and eager to take up our cross and follow Jesus, to suffer for what *we* believe in? A more recent example of doing exactly that is the life, teaching and death of Blessed Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador. He was shot and killed in 1980 while saying Mass, for his defence of justice for the poor and his calling for peace during the civil war in that country. The Church has declared him a modern martyr, whose life also reflected those words of Isaiah, "a man despised and rejected" by the rich and powerful, "a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering" – his own and that of others – "yet ours were the sufferings he bore. He was pierced for our faults, crushed for our sins." Through God's power, and the millions of Christians inspired by him, he will "see his heirs" and through him, and them, "what the Lord wishes will be done".

But again: what are we to do? Dominic died in the 19th century, Romero in 1980 in El Salvador. Both seem a whole world away from us now. How can we imitate the love and faith these men have shown, and answer the call to "take up our cross" and follow Jesus, to live in our own lives those words of Isaiah?

What can we learn from their lives? From Dominic and Romero, as well as Jesus, we can learn "love of enemies". And we can see the non-violence of the cross. In the midst of anger, division and accusation, Dominic and Romero chose to make themselves vulnerable. They chose not to return like-for-like. They chose to take on, literally, the suffering and the sins that were thrown their way. Neither Dominic nor Romero returned violence for violence, anger for anger, any more than Jesus did in his Cross and Passion. They knew that unconditional love, even of enemies, and especially for the poorest and weakest- the least, the last and the lost – a willingness to accept suffering for what is right, rather than inflict it: this is what changes the hearts and minds of the people – and through them the world.

Every stone or harsh word that was thrown at Dominic, through his love and patience and non-retaliation, was transformed into a building block of reconciliation between churches, and into the renewal of faith and love in the Catholic Church here in England. This is exactly what Jesus taught, and practiced in his Passion and death. It is what has been called the Way of the Cross of Non-Violent Love.

Blessed Dominic suffered for the faith, and the Church has always recognised "Martyrs for the Faith". But when Blessed Oscar Romero was declared a martyr for the faith, the Cardinal announcing the decision said that he was killed "in hatred for a faith that, full of love, could not be silent in the face of injustices that relentlessly and cruelly slaughtered the poor and their defenders". Romero's martyrdom calls us to a new type of martyrdom, of willingness to suffer for the faith.

There have always been "white martyrs", the "daily martyrdom" of doing every day what is right, and avoiding evil. But now we can add the daily martyrdom of *averting* evil, of acting like a missionary, as Dominic did, reaching out of our usual lives to avert – to stop – evil – in social and political life, as well as personal, family and spiritual life. This involves a willingness and openness to "hear the cry of the poor" as Romero and Dominic both did, and act on it, in the spirit of the Way of the Cross of Non-Violent Love. Dominic could have stayed in the security of Italy. Romero could have chosen to keep quiet about the troubles

of his country people. But they knew the Gospel called them to step out of their security, to reach out from their comfort zones.

Following the example of Dominic and Romero, we are called to stand up for what we believe in - including peace, and justice for the poor – at a personal sacrifice, willing to take on the suffering and sin of our time and redeem it, as they did. Not just waiting for it to come to us – especially if we are relatively comfortable or secure – but going out of ourselves, our families and communities, our lives and our comfort zones – to do something for peace and justice, in the name of the God of Jesus Christ.

People like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and the Catholic woman Servant of God Dorothy Day, have shown us how. Gandhi, a Hindu, was inspired by the teaching and example of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in His Passion. Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day, among many others, have shown the world the power of organised non-violence. They have shown us the power of non-violent love to change the world, to promote justice for the poor and peace in God's world. It is being used practically every day somewhere in the world. I even read the other day how some Conservative councillors sat down in the road in front of a load of vans to stop them ruining their village green. Imagine that - Conservative councillors acting like road protestors! And personally, I've taken part, with other Catholics and Christians – in Pax Christi and the Catholic Worker movement – in many active non-violence protests, opposing things like the arms trade, the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and British nuclear weapons. Some of these have resulted in “being taken away by force and by law”, in Isaiah's words today. Although, thank God, we were able to “plead our cause”, in court.

The Way of the Cross of Non-Violent Love, of Jesus, of Blessed Dominic and Oscar Romero – can take us down a path that challenges the powers of our day, and the sins and injustices of this world. And their response can require of us that ‘turning of the other cheek’, that ‘kissing of the stone that is thrown’, that willingness to be ‘taken away by force and by law’. But it is through these wounds, freely accepted, that healing and justice can grow, and the church and the whole human family be re-united under God.

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