

Palm Sunday

Sermon on the Cross

Jamaica Plain, March 24, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

In the last ten years, a liturgical practice has become widespread to celebrate this Sunday as both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. The rationale is that it's easy to remember the crowds cheering Jesus as he enters Jerusalem and then to celebrate Easter Sunday, skipping over Jesus' death. Though in our congregation, we do have a Tenebrae service on Good Friday.

This year, Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday falls on the anniversary of the death of a figure who has been important to me in my religious life, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. In 1984 and '85 I traveled to El Salvador, staying with a journalist friend, Chris Hedges. I saw Romero's Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador, its decoration left unfinished so that the money could go to the poor; metal rods extended from the exterior concrete for attaching a marble facade, there was plywood around the altar.

Turning down a palace to live in, Romero slept in a hammock, residing in a few simple rooms on the grounds of the Divine Providence Hospital, a facility for cancer patients.

Oscar Romero had been a shy, scholarly cleric. He was chosen archbishop during El Salvador's troubles because of his conservative, cautious manner. Then a close friend, the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande was killed by the death squads, and Romero had a change of heart. He talked about the attacks on the poor in his homilies. He went out into the country side and talked to people about what was going on in their villages. He preached on March 23, 1980, "No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. It is time that you come to your senses and obey your conscience rather than follow sinful commands."

The next night, while saying mass in the chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital, he was shot by a lone gunman, and died shortly afterwards. I visited the modern chapel in 1984, sitting in a pew to try to comprehend what had happened there. I noticed that the large (6') crucifix, with a very lifelike Jesus that I had seen in photos of the chapel from the time of the assassination had been replaced; now in the front of the church was a large cross with a mirror in the center of it. I thought, 'now the crucifixion is reflected in the people of El Salvador.' Afterwards I spoke to some of the cancer patients in the hospital. One woman said, "Senor Romero, he is not dead, he is still with us."

Romero traveled to remote villages to take part in their religious processions; I brought in a poster which shows one of these processions. They probably looked something like Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Today's text has Jesus riding two donkeys, challenging the idea of the warrior messiah on the white steed. I'm not sure how you ride two donkeys at once – straddle both of them? In that case, with his legs outstretched, Jesus in the Palm Sunday procession forms an upside down image of the cross. The cheering of the crowds is the counterpoint to a terrible death on the cross.

Why did Oscar Romero die? Why did Jesus die on the cross? Contrary to the frequent artistic portrayal of the cross high up in the air (there is an old joke with the punch line, "Peter, I can see your house from up here."), scholars now think the cross was about 7 feet in total length. That would make Jesus' death up close and personal for his mother and friends. Though fundamentalists will tell you with certainty why Jesus had to die on the cross, for most of the church it's ultimately a mystery.

In talking about the meanings of the cross for us in our church, I want to talk about some of crosses in my spiritual pilgrimage. I grew up in a family that was a Catholic/Protestant "mixed marriage;" my parents felt burned by organized religion and didn't raise us in either faith. We didn't have crosses in our home. In 1980, I did an internship at the Universalist Church of New York City, located on the Upper West Side. In a church production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, I played Rev. Hale of Beverly. For my

costume, I was told, with historical inaccuracy, to get a cross. So I bought a large plain wooden cross at a West Side bodega for \$1.

Returning to divinity school, I wanted to have experience in the Black church, and worked as a field education student at the Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Roxbury –I pass it these days when I drive to my son's school, Boston Latin Academy. When I preached at Wednesday evening services at Charles Street, the "Mothers of the Church," older women in white deaconesses uniforms, would pray for me. It was profoundly moving as a young student to have older Black women, who had seen EVERYTHING, praying for me. When the pastor preached on Sunday morning, the church lights dimmed, and the cross behind the pulpit would light up. I associate the light of that cross with those faithful "Mothers of the Church."

On April 25th, 1982, the Universalist Church of New York City ordained me to the "ministry of word and sacrament in the congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association." For an ordination present, a Catholic nun friend that I knew from a spiritual direction training program made me a white stole with gold Greek crosses, a traditional symbol of Universalism. I'll wear it on Easter Sunday.

In 1984, I visited a Salvadoran refugee camp run by Lutheran World Services, "Fe y Esperanza" –"Faith and Hope." The residents were so pleased to have a pastor visit them that they gave me a beautiful hand painted cross they had made, with peaceful village scenes. Refugees who had lost loved ones, their homes, and virtually all of their possessions gave me a present of a cross.

One of the American Lutheran World Services relief worker in the camp was later killed in South Africa. In San Salvador I met Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez, who had been tortured by the death squads. To try to provide Medardo with some protection through celebrity, we arranged for him to speak at King's Chapel, Harvard Divinity School, and here at First Church in Jamaica Plain. During that trip, Medardo gave Massachusetts House Speaker George Kevarian a cross made by political prisoners from the Marione

Prison in San Salvador. These small crosses were carved out of seeds, and painted by the prisoners to raise money for their families. Over the years I gave away all of my copies of these crosses, along with the little black crosses of the "mothers of the disappeared."

Bill Anderson, the husband of our former church administrator Cat Anderson, brought me back an Ethiopian cross from the sacred site of Lalibella, where medieval churches were carved out of living stone. The decorated cross is made out of beaten silver, and typical of Ethiopian crosses, has a hinge. I think the hinged is meant to suggest that the cross is a door to spiritual reality.

When visiting Istanbul on my sabbatical trip last year, I was able to meet the "Green Patriarch" Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. As a present I gave him a small cloth purse that my wife Ellen had made. I had put the \$1 wooden cross from the Crucible inside. Bartholomew took out the wooden cross and kissed it, and gave me a small brass cross with five circles on it.

After all these years and crosses, the cross functions like an icon for me, a shorthand reminder to remember God and the church, to remember who I am, and who I can be as a human person. In our worship survey several years ago, most people in our congregation like having the cross where it is. Some people don't, and my ministry committee suggested that I preach on the cross.

Our gilded wooden cross was put up during the ministry of Dr. Frank Holmes in the 1930's. Kojiro Tomita, a Japanese art curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, told Dr. Holmes, 'you need a symbol for people to meditate upon.' Bela Sziklas, a Hungarian Unitarian architect carved the cross. So our cross has its roots in the work of a Japanese alien and a Hungarian refugee.

What can the cross mean to us at the First Church in Jamaica Plain, Unitarian Universalist? The cross is a traditional symbol on maps for a city, and the cross reminds us of our responsibility to ministry in this our holy city. The horizontal and vertical bars

suggest the intersection of the human (horizontal) with the divine (vertical) in religious community. We are a religious community in the city.

The cross is a door into a deeper spiritual reality. There are many doors, but the cross is a door especially connected with our tradition. As humans we grow in likeness to God through our love, service and justice. "Through the cross, joy came into the world," goes an ancient hymn of the church. Through the power of sacrificial love and forgiveness, we bear the beams of God's embracing love.

On Palm Sunday, the cross reminds me that I am one of the cheering crowd, yelling for a messiah that I hope will free me from the Roman overlords and their tax collectors; I am one of the Roman soldiers, far from home and loved ones, given the dirty detail of nailing convicted criminals to their crosses; I am a thief, having stolen my birthright and squandered it, who asks "Remember me when you enter into your Kingdom" on the cross.

The cross is made up of all of our community, all of the names of the living and the dead, those of the past and tradition, including people like Oscar Romero, future generations, and the earth.

When we wave our palms, we recognize the cross mirrored in us, as we enter into the passion of our city and its people. We enter into the reality of the passion, death, and resurrection of our holy city, and the universal family of the people of God.