By Daniel P. Horan

Among the many wisdom figures, prophets, and friends of God from whom we can draw insight and inspiration in our Christian journeys of discipleship stands Blessed Óscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador. In December 1977 he proclaimed that, “To be a Christian now means to have the courage to preach the true teaching of Christ and not be afraid of it, not be silent out of fear and preach something easy that won’t cause problems.” This reminder of the challenge and responsibility of our Christian call resonates strongly with this Lenten Sunday’s readings.

Too often Christian ministers, especially those entrusted with the responsibility to preach the word of God, succumb to the understandable temptation of preaching a milquetoast message, a sermon of neutral or no consequence. To preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to announce not only good news to those who suffer or have been victimized by the communities in which they find themselves, but also to declare an admonishing message to those who benefit at the expense of those who suffer. Fear of losing face, losing collection revenue, losing friends, losing a comfortable life, or even losing one’s life tempts the heart and mind to take an easier non-consequential route.

In today’s Gospel Jesus conveys solidarity with those facing just such a circumstance. Acknowledging to his followers that he must “go to Jerusalem” (always code in the Gospels for the Passion that is to come), he soberly conveys the stakes: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” Though death may seem like a defeat, the risk of earthly death may be necessary—even though no one rightly desires such a premature end—because the witness provided bears more fruit than the alternative, which is silence, complacency, complicity.

Romero knew the cost about which Jesus speaks. In April 1978, Romero said: “A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what gospel is that?” To risk one’s own reputation and life for the sake of the courageous Gospel of Jesus Christ is costly not just for archbishops and other public ministers in the church, but it is also for all who dare to call themselves Christians, for it arises from our universal baptismal call.

Sadly, today we still have many pressing issues within the context of the Church in the United States that call for our “interpretation in the light of the Gospel” (Gaudium et Spes, no. 4). The
reality of structural racism, the persistence of misogyny, the dehumanization of those who are different, the discrimination against immigrants, the pervasiveness of gun violence, and the subtle and all-too-silent suffering of the abject poor—each of these call for a response that demands a risk on our part. The question is whether or not we are willing to surrender our need for control and comfort and take the courageous Christian stance in our society. Or, as Jesus puts it eschatologically, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.”

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews in our Second Reading recounts that in the face of that challenging decision—to hold onto his earthly life or to risk surrendering it to follow the will of God—Jesus “offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

What about us? Have we opened ourselves to learn this kind of obedience, the *listening* to the will of God that we might otherwise prefer not to hear?

Returning to the model of Romero, whose murder we commemorate every year this month, is generally remembered for his bold stand against structural injustice and systemic violence in El Salvador. However, those familiar with his story know that his openness to such a public stance only emerged in the last few years of his life and ministry. It’s worth recalling this fact because it provides us with some hope that the many of us who still struggle to recognize the hard truth Jesus proclaims and to preach the courageous Gospel we are sent to announce still always have a chance for fuller conversion. It is not too late. With the Psalmist today we can pray: “Create a clean heart in me, O God.” And with a heart renewed, may we venture forward to work for the peace and justice announced in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Daniel P. Horan, OFM, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.