



St OSCAR ROMERO : A LENTEN SAINT

By Joe Burns, Commission Member

This was the theme of Todd Walatka's talk given on 11 Marc. It was hosted at the City Campus of Leeds Trinity University under the banner of SPARK Social Justice.

Using quotes from St Oscar's homilies, interspersed with a few from Pope Leo, Todd explored how St Oscar used his preaching as a way of promoting the key traditional themes of Lent: Prayer, fasting and Almsgiving.



Todd in full flow

Prayer was a recurring theme in his preaching and he was always exhorting people to 'give glory to God'. This is a common enough sentiment in Church circles. It maybe conjures up pictures of being in churches with incense burning and people on their knees. However, his vision was much more concerned with seeing the Glory of God through his encounters with other people – especially the rural peasants (campesinos) and recognising that

'the Glory of God is the human person 'fully alive'.

Fasting is the moment to review your life 'and judge things, to see if you value anything more than God'. Do we value money, possessions, power more than God?

Almsgiving he talks about in terms of 'experiencing ourselves as brothers and sisters. Time and again, St Oscar talks about deepening our understanding of what it means to be 'fully human'. The way to do this is through reflecting on our understanding the full humanity (c/f dignity) of our brothers and sisters. Todd related the most striking example of this, given by St Oscar during the homily at the funeral of his assassinated friend Rutilio Grande SJ. In that homily, Romero directly addressed the killers with the striking phrase "queridos asesinos" – literally "dear murderers" – as part of a call to conversion, reconciliation, and justice. He then goes on to speak about forgiveness, the need for conversion, and the Church's refusal to respond with hatred. The ability to do that must give all of us pause for thought.

Todd's talk covered many other points in a thoughtful and reflective way. There were about 20 people there, and it was a shame there were not more, as this really was a talk that made you sit up and think more about some of the things that St Oscar said – and how we, ourselves think, about other people.

It was an inter-generational event with university students as well as retired people coming along. One SPARK community member commented "*I thought it would be more academic, but it was inspirational.*" Another said "*I came along but didn't think I would meet people who are saying out loud what I have been thinking in my head.*"



John Battle, Commission Chair, Thanks Todd for his insights

If you are interested to read more (and I would encourage you in this) then we will be making Todd's talk available as soon as we can as a pamphlet. SPARK are grateful to Leeds Trinity University for making their premises available to hold this event. Equally, we are grateful to the Romero Trust and the indefatigable Julian Filochowski for once again bringing the Romero Lecture to Leeds.



TOLERANCE: IT'S IMPORTANT

by Sara Forrest, Commission member

Our parish are donating to Aid to the Church in Need for their work in Pakistan. It upset me because when I lived in Pakistan 60 years ago it seemed to be a tolerant place. I didn't feel threatened and wasn't bullied or name called at school because I was different from the other pupils. I wondered what had changed. As I pondered the situation I remembered that we didn't stay for our allotted two years because, while we were enroute for a visit to UK, India shelled Karachi where we lived. I was 7 and was most worried that I was missing out on the excitement of hiding under the table like my school friends! I know better now.



I then heard people talking about the introduction of TV into the House of Commons and the consensus seemed to be that people now speak there to get clips per their social media and the days of debates



and MPs who spoke for long periods and successfully changed minds had gone. Then I read an article on how people who used to get 'lost in a book' have found it difficult to do so now that they're used to short reads on the internet. The solution was to spend 20 minutes a day for a few weeks reading a book in order to redevelop the skill and engage deeply with the text.

Maybe those snap like/dislike judgements mean that we are used to snap judgements and to discount those who are different by appearance or behaviour? Maybe the fear of embarrassment, because of that difference,



holds us back from finding out what we have in common?

Sadly, the tension between India and Pakistan remains. Injustices from their Colonial past and a lack of political will to forge a more co-operative neighbourly relationship drive stories that feed fear. It is all too common for politicians to use fear of difference to create a cohesive force that increases their hold on power and the oppression of their people.

Perhaps this Lent we could carefully contemplate how we behave towards those who we perceive to be different and why that is so? If we all do that and develop our tolerance and perhaps curiosity, about those who are different we can improve the peace in our local community.

Perhaps when we see something that makes us angry on the internet we could take a step back and think about who might be influencing the post? Maybe they want to channel your anger to gain a bigger following? Who gains from the negative emotion they create?.

There are many Gospel stories about Jesus making a point of reaching out to those who were poor, or different and those who were in dire straits, we can follow his good example especially during Lent.

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ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE OF REPENTANCE

by Joe Burns, Commission Member

It was a select group of 14 people who gathered in Dortmund Square, just off the Headrow in Leeds, to hold an Ash Wednesday service of repentance for the continued possession of nuclear weapons. It was a very cold day, so it was not too surprising that there was not a large gathering. Nevertheless,



sometimes faith propels us to do things when, otherwise, we might prefer to stay somewhere much warmer. Possession and possible use of nuclear weapons is something that successive popes have spoken out against and we wanted to express our solidarity with those views through our prayers.



The Leeds Diocese Pax Christi group had organised the service with prayers and readings from a variety of sources – including Pope Leo and Daniel Berrigan. Although held in central Leeds, people had come from Skipton, Bingley, Harrogate, Garforth and Birstall – as well as Leeds. As well as Pax Christi group members there were also 4 Commission members who took part in the service.



Pax Christi member, Tim Devereux, was interviewed the following day by Radio Maria. He was asked,

“You, Tim, are the prime minister. Peace negotiations with Russia have failed and Mr Putin has fired a nuclear weapon at Leeds. Do you fire back?”

Tim provided two answers!:

1. No - if Putin is lobbing nukes at us, the nuclear doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, MAD, has lived up to its acronym and clearly failed. Leeds, Yorkshire and the UK will be destroyed, but I can't see the point of joining the ranks of mass murderers myself, so I wouldn't unleash UK missiles.

2. Well, if I'm PM, I would have already implemented Article 6 of the 56-year-old Non-Proliferation Treaty, where all Parties undertook "to pursue good-faith negotiations on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race, to nuclear disarmament, and to general and complete disarmament."

So, UK would have signed the 5 year old Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and scrapped our nukes. In which case, I don't think even Putin would be targeting us.

Enough said!

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DIALOGUE IN DFANGEROUS TIMES

By John Duffly, Good Shepherd Church, Mytholmroyd

On an autumn Saturday afternoon in Huddersfield, I encountered a group of young Asian men offering leaflets headed STOPWW3 and learned that they were members of the Ahmadiyya community, an Islamic messianic movement, dedicated to peace, and to respect for other faiths. We exchanged contact details.

I told the imam by email about Leeds Diocese J&P, and about Pax Christi, and in the New Year, received an invitation to join the Iftar for Peace (Uniting people of all backgrounds in peace and mutual respect). This was held, ironically, on 28th February, the day USA and Israel began bombing Iran.



It was a big community event: after the recitation of a passage from the Quran, there were speeches from the Mayor of Kirklees, the MP for Huddersfield (a Sikh), the bishop of Huddersfield (an Indian woman), a police inspector (who had observed the Ramadan fast for the day), and a representative from Huddersfield's Hindu community. And the Imam spoke, illustrating experiences which pointed to Ramadan as a motivation for becoming a better person in relationships, rather than a period of mortification. He also stressed the Ahmadiyya principle of living by the prophet's earliest teaching, the roots of their faith.

The welcome and hospitality were warm and generous, and after a short break for communal prayer, young men and boys served a feast.

I had a conversation with the Imam, and was able to refer to Hans Kung's words:

No peace among the nations



*without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions
without dialogue between the religions
No dialogue between the religions
without investigation of the foundation
of the religions.*

— Hans Kung, Christianity: Essence, History, and Future

I hope to continue the conversation; the world needs dialogue in these dangerous times.

[Eds Note: Interestingly, the same quote by Hans Kung was used at a recent community Iftar at the Makkah Mosque in Leeds – as one of the reasons for holding community iftars]

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SPARK COMMUNITY MEMBER MATTY & PEACEJAM YOUTH LEADERSHIP TEAM

By Matty Maslen, Bradford

In February, PeaceJam UK hosted their first in-person Youth Leadership Training Weekend. We welcomed 13 members of our Youth Team, aged 14-26, to Bradford for three days of learning, creativity, and community building.



The PeaceJam UK Youth Team meets every month online, to discuss issue areas that members are passionate about. Together, we explore ways that members can create positive change in their own settings, be that at school, at home, or in their local community. This year (academic year 2025/26), the topics our members are passionate about include:

- Youth involvement in politics
- Inadequate youth support services
- Mental Health impacts of social media
- Wellbeing in education

- Disability awareness
- Homelessness
- Impacts of AI
- Media misinformation

Over the course of three days, our members worked together to further develop their thinking on these issue areas into tangible Social Action Projects. With the help of facilitators, both internal to PeaceJam UK and external, they explored some key components of community-based social action.

We had the pleasure of hosting three incredible workshop leads:

- Lauren Kelly ran a zine-making workshop (*Ed:google it!*), demonstrating how creative communication can increase the accessibility of information on topics that can often seem overwhelming. Some of our members are now planning to include zine-making in their own social action projects as a way of sparking conversations and bringing people together.



- Sudhir Selvaraj led us in a River of Life activity, shining light on the importance of making space for self-reflection when undertaking projects we care deeply about.
- Josie Tothill ran a workshop exploring how to bring people together for a



common cause, using values as the foundation of community building.

A highlight for many of our Youth Team members was our trip to [CATCH](#) (Community Action to Create Hope) in the Harehills area of Leeds. Here our young people found inspiration in the responsibility they saw the CATCH volunteers undertaking. Seeing young people, their own age and younger, responsible for looking after the space, the farm animals, and welcoming visitors like ourselves, reshaped for many of them what 'youth empowerment' and 'youth-led' can mean. As one of our Youth Team reflected: "*young people can have an impact, and not just negatively*". When young people are able to claim agency, and are supported to enact meaningful change, the ripples are felt throughout the community. Our Youth Leadership Training Weekend wasn't full of traditional Leadership skills workshops. Yet they reflected they were feeling more confident and capable to undertake their projects when they returned home.



Through a focus on creativity, play, and fun, they presented ideas to the group, curated a space where they each felt supported to be vulnerable, and made genuine connections with each other. As one member said, "we're a friendship group now".

This was our first Youth Leadership Training Weekend, and from the feedback of those who joined us, we're planning to make it a core part of our annual Youth Team. This year our meet-up was made possible by: the generosity of our workshop-leads volunteered their time and expertise; the University of Bradford and Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture for providing venues; Rotary Club of Jersey who funded travel for two of our attendees, and the Leeds Justice and Peace Commission's [SPARK Social Justice Project](#) who made a donation towards catering costs.

Matty has been a member of the SPARK community almost from the start of the project over 6 years ago. He edited this newsletter during his time at Glasgow university, and has regularly contributed articles since then as he has pursued his interest in peace and peacemaking.

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CONVERSATIONS OF HOPE

by Kathy Shaw, SPARK Project Manager

Earlier this month I was invited to join a meeting with the [Leeds Muslim Youth Forum](#) to talk about our work and ways to counter the divisive messages our young adults receive on social media and elsewhere. This ties into our SPARK Conversations of Hope and also continues the themes of Pilgrims of Hope 2025.





I had a lively conversation with about 15 young people, topics such as responding to racism and challenging injustice and poverty. One member of the group gave me inspiration in her explanation about the best way to engage people in our target age group.

Respectfully, she assured me that older people are happy sitting round a table and talking about social justice issues, but the best way to catch interest with the under 30's is to focus more on visual messaging.

The group gave me examples of effective TikTok reels and are in the process of completing a documentary and film project so are very tuned into this.

On Friday 13th March a group of people, brought together through a belief in inter-faith work, gathered at St Richards's church in Seacroft hosted by Reverend Anne Russell. The evening was part of a wider community response to this being an area targeted by Reform and where there is an active campaign against people seeking asylum who are accommodated in this parish.



The wonderful Cassandra James brought a group from St Augustine's Parish in Harehills and by the end of the evening there were nearly 60 young people and their leaders from

around the local area. Group discussions focussed on current concerns and aspirations for young people and an activity around interfaith connection, what role can young people play in reducing prejudice, what helps people from different faiths build trust with each other. As the youngest member of our group wisely told us, "In all our faiths, there is love". We could all experience that truth throughout this evening. I was grateful to be there and hear the wisdom of young people who spoke with confidence about the importance of their faith and what Ramadan and Lent means to those who share these beliefs.

A young person from a local sports group led the call to prayer (Azaan) and after prayers the Iftar, where we all shared wonderful food together. It was a memorable and inspiring evening. Connections and friendships were made and hopefully will be sustained, as we would love to do another similar event, maybe something outdoors in the summer.





EVENTS

 <p>Sat 21 Mar 26</p>	<p>Everything is Connected – How do we care for our Common Home? <i>St Vincents Church, Pickmere Road, Sheffield S10 1GY 11:00am – 3pm</i> Speakers are Bishop John Arnold and Dr Maria Exall, Honorary Fellow at the Centre for Catholic Social Thought and Practice in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. We are cordially invited by our compatriots in Hallam Diocese. Use this link to find out more and book a place on this free event https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/lenten-day-of-recollection-tickets-1980808829531</p>
 <p>Tue 31 Mar 26</p>	<p>J&P Stations of the Cross via Zoom <i>Online Via Zoom 7:30pm – 8:15pm</i> Join us for an online Stations of the Cross service with a justice theme. ALL welcome. Please use the link to register and receive the Zoom link https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScSzpbsQF2O1b9QMjCqtoFBRX8K2UldVvcsMlrJggKvRwrCwQ/viewform?usp=publish-editor</p>
 <p>Sat 18 Apr</p>	<p>Everyday Experiences: Irish communities in Britain living through the Conflict <i>The Peace Museum, Salts Mill, Saltaire 1:30pm – 3:30pm</i> How did the conflict ‘in and about’ Northern Ireland affect people of Irish heritage living in Britain? Just bring yourself and your memories, or just come to listen to others. Use this link to book a place at this free workshop: https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/the-peace-museum</p>
 <p>Mon 20 Apr</p>	<p>Anger into Action: Anti-Hate-Crime campaigning <i>Mill Hill Chapel, City Square, Leeds, LS1 5EB 12:00 – 1:30pm</i> This is a Leeds Sanctuary Social Justice Lunch. They are a space for everyone who dreams of a better world; whether you’re a seasoned campaigner or a budding activist. This one focuses on Hate Crime and learning about West Yorkshire Citizens’ upcoming Anti-Hate Crime campaign, from local community organiser, Becky Howcroft. https://www.leedssanctuary.org.uk/social-justice-lunches</p>
 <p>Fri 24 – Sun 26 Jul</p>	<p>‘Just Talk’ the 2026 National Justice & Peace Network Conference <i>Swanwick Christian Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire</i> The annual conference bringing together J&P supporters from across England and Wales. Keep an eye on their website for details of speakers and workshops https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/conference/</p>

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