

**Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year A
(Apr. 10, 2011)**

How Are We Dead?

A number of years ago Pope John Paul II published an encyclical letter called “Evangelium vitae,” the Gospel of Life. In it he decried the fact that our world is permeated by what he called a culture of death.

We have only to go to the news broadcasts on TV or to our daily papers to verify what the Holy Father is saying: genocide in the Sudan; unending wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Pakistan and perhaps Libya; suicide bombings in those same countries; homicide on the streets of Washington. In just the past three days five people have been killed in South-East Washington alone. We seek to solve so many of our problems by violence and death. Abortion for unwanted babies and neglect or outright euthanasia for unwanted elderly who are ill. Capital punishment for the worst criminals. International problems? Either sell them weapons so they can kill one another or go in and kill them ourselves with our own super-sophisticated missiles.

It reaches a kind of paroxysm in the case of the people who killed the doctors who were performing abortions. Remember them? Two states asked to kill the men who killed the doctors who were killing the babies to show that killing is wrong. A culture of death!

Would you say I’m pessimistic? Actually I’m not. I really tend to be rather optimistic in my outlook on life. And do you want to know why? Because I believe the Gospel. I believe the good news that Jesus came to preach and I believe in the good things that he did and the love he poured out on all of us.

Two weeks ago we heard about the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Jesus gave her living water to slake her thirst. Last week we heard about the man born blind. Jesus gave him his sight. On these Sundays the Liturgy challenged us to ask ourselves, “How do we thirst? How are we blind?” Today we are challenged to ask ourselves, “How are we dead in this culture of death?” And we are challenged to see how in Jesus’ response to death we can see how our culture of death can be changed to a Gospel of

Life.

Today we meet a dear friend of Jesus. His name is Lazarus. Lazarus, a name that means helpless. Perhaps like the Samaritan woman, like the blind man, he, too, stands for all of us, thirsty, blind, and helpless. But this man is really helpless. He's dead, in his tomb, rotting away. And in that tomb, he is completely bound up, according to the burial custom of the times: cords around his arms and legs, two stones over his eyes, his mouth gagged, a cloth around his head, lifeless in a tomb with a stone in front and the smell of decay inside.

Does Lazarus stand for all of us? Is humankind in this culture of death like Lazarus, helpless, frustrated, bound up, smelly, decaying, blind, deaf – dead?

Well, that's how Jesus found his friend, that helpless man, Lazarus, a man he had loved so much. And when he stood at Lazarus' tomb he wept, he wept bitterly. The people saw and said, "Look, see how he loved him!" Jesus said, "Roll that stone away." But Lazarus' sister said, "Don't roll that stone away. Leave things as they are. The smell would be unbearable." Are we ever like that? Do we say, "Leave things as they are? Let's not touch this or that issue. It might explode in our faces." Indeed we even say, "Let's not open a can of worms. But Jesus was opening a tomb of worms.

He said, "Roll that stone away." And then he called, "Lazarus," and he commanded, "Come out!" And that dead man came out and started to live.

Jesus wants to do for us, for all humanity, what he did for that dead man. He wants us to live, and he gives us the gift of life. That's at least one of the lessons of today. He also gives us hope as we hear in his dialogue with Martha when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, in spite of death, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die."

In John's Gospel image and symbol are very important. Lazarus is bound. When he comes forth at the command of Jesus, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go free."

Jesus wants to do for all of us, for the whole world, what he did for Lazarus, for the blind man, for the Samaritan woman. Dear friends, we are all the Samaritan woman. We are all thirsting for perhaps we know not

what: perhaps more meaning in our lives – or just more than we experience right now. Jesus wants to give us the living water that will slake our thirst. We are all the man born blind, the beggar by the side of the road. Jesus wants to open our eyes so that we can see him everywhere. We are all Lazarus, and Jesus want us to live. He wants to set us free to live the new life that he has in fact already given us, to live it with joy and with enthusiasm, knowing that we have been called by God to something splendid beyond words. Knowing this Gospel of Life, living it, will surely be an antidote to the culture of death the pope decries.

So let's step out of the tomb. Let's take the bonds from our arms and legs. Let's remove the stone from our eyes, take the cotton out of our ears and mouth, and live – live, with him and with one another.

Now in the light of an activity that is happening in our parish this weekend I think it is appropriate to say this: when Lazarus stepped out of that tomb he had a place to go to. He had a place to call home. There are countless people in our world today who do not have a home – and not only in our world, but in our nation and, particularly for us, here in Washington. Our parish Social Justice Ministry Committee is asking us to write letters today to our City Council members and to the mayor asking for the necessary funds to provide better housing conditions or just plain housing for so many people who live on the streets. Won't you take a few minutes to come to McKenna Hall after Mass and write a letter? Sample letters will be provided that you could use as models for your own. And even if you do not live in the District, you could sign a petition expressing your concern and sympathy for those who are in need. This will not take long, and even though it's a little inconvenient, if we all do this together, it can go a long way to helping people who need help. And after all, isn't that what the Lord has asked us all to do?