

Homily for Fifth Sunday of Lent  
March 29, 2009

### Introduction

Each year on this Sunday I have to make the same confession - annoyance, even anger, at whoever designed the Gospel reading we just heard. While Jesus' raising of Lazarus from his tomb is certainly an amazing story with great lessons for us, the text we read stops too soon. And therein lies my enormous discomfort.

### I

Listen, if you would, to what follows immediately after the Gospel just proclaimed. You'll recall that it ended with the words: "Many of the Jews who went out to Mary and saw what Jesus had done began to believe in Him".

That verse continues: "...but others went to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting. 'Here is this man working all these signs' they said 'and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy the Holy Place and our nation.'

One of them, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said, 'You don't seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is better for one many to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed'...From that day they determined to kill him [Jesus]."

### II

Obviously this last part is of immense importance. Jesus died not because he was raising people from the dead and doing other wonderful works; or because he was preaching a Gospel of love and compassion. He was deemed a threat to the status quo of his time and place, something which the power structure there could not abide. So "they determined to kill him".

### II

We just marked the anniversary of a modern and eerily similar event that took place on March 24: the 29th year since the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop, Oscar Romero, as he celebrated Mass in a small chapel in the city of San Salvador. The day before on a Sunday morning in his cathedral the Archbishop had preached as usual and uttered these challenging words to the military of his country: "I ask you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God stop the repression". That demand and so many others issued by Romero to an unjust and violent status quo, just as Jesus had done, led to his assassination.

### III

So what does all of this have to do with us here in Northern Virginia, United States of America on a March day in 2009? At least two things, I believe.

First, next week, Holy Week, we shall mark once again the culminating days of Jesus' life. We shall accompany him as he eats his Last Supper with his disciples; as he submits to arrest, trial and condemnation; as he walks the Via Crucis to Calvary and dies by the horrible Roman practice of crucifixion. It will be most important for us to remember throughout these days the very astute, political calculus we read about in today's full Gospel "It is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish".

Second, as Archbishop Romero understood and practiced, at our time in history we are not exempt from the same role which Jesus played in his time. As persons baptized into Jesus' dying and rising, our vocation demands that we, too, speak truth to power in whatever ways and within whatever circles of influence God gives us to operate.

#### Conclusion

Just as a footnote to this last consideration, you may know that just about one month before Archbishop Romero was killed he wrote a personal letter to then-U.S. President, Jimmy Carter. From one Christian to another, Romero wrote, please desist from sending more military arms to the armed forces of El Salvador. Unfortunately, the Carter Administration ignored Romero's plea and the awful civil war in his country wore on for another decade with an estimated loss of some 70,000 combatants and civilians.