

5th Sunday of Lent A April 10, 2011 – Fr. Gerald Haemmerle

Jean Vanier, a Canadian, a man who is about 90 years old, has given the world a wonderful message by his life. A former Navy officer, he was teaching philosophy at the University of Toronto when he visited a friend, a chaplain at a hospital for handicapped people, especially mentally handicapped people. He experienced a profound awakening to a new calling. He went to France, and invited two handicapped men to come and live with him. He cooked with them, he worked in the garden with them, he prayed with them, he shared life with them. They were soon joined by others, and the L'Arche communities began to spread around the world, today there are over 80 such communities. Henri Nouwen, a most popular spiritual writer in recent times, lived at such a community and helped to make them better known. Here at St. Charles we have a Faith and Light community of handicapped people who meet every month to pray and listen to the message of Jesus and experience Christian community.

Jean Vanier said that in all severely handicapped people there is an incredible cry, a primal cry, and the cry is "Do you love me?", "Does my life have any value?", "Do you want to be my friend?" Vanier goes on to say that that primal cry is the cry of every human being regardless of whether we are young, a teenager, a young or middle aged adult, or a senior citizen, "Do you love me, am I worthwhile, will you be my friend?" It is because of guilt that we all have doubts about the answers to those questions.

Jean Vanier has written a beautiful book on the gospel of John, entitled Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John. The eleventh chapter is about our gospel today. Vanier suggests that perhaps Lazarus was a handicapped man. He never speaks in the gospel. The home he lived in is referred to as the home of his sister Martha. Martha and Mary appear to be two unmarried sisters devoted to caring for their brother. Jesus seems to have been moved by Lazarus' death more than by anyone else in the gospel, for the people, seeing Jesus weeping, said "See how he loved him."

The most important words in the gospel are Jesus' words, "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha professes her faith.

But the lines I find most fascinating are the words Jesus speaks when he goes to the tomb. He says, "Take away the stone." Then he calls out, "Lazarus, come out." And after he came out, Jesus says, "Untie him and let him go free."

Aren't we all Lazarus? Are there not parts in all of us that are dead? We all have stones that need to be removed. We all need to be untied so that we can go free. There are so many examples in our lives. I think of a woman who came to me some time ago. She had had an abortion many years before, later married and had other children. But over all those years she had suffered from the guilt of that sin committed so many years before. She needed to have that stone removed, to let it go, to receive the loving forgiveness of God.

There is another more common burden that so many of us carry through life. I think of the hurt that we once experienced from a loved one, perhaps a parent, a spouse, a friend. And we have never been able to forget it, to forgive the other person, to let it go. And we are still bound by that. We must remove it, untie it, let it go. And then we can be free.

A whole other sermon could be written on helping other people roll back the stone in their lives, and on how we can untie others who are bound, so that they can be free.

We are all Lazarus. We are all dead. And Jesus calls us all back to life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?" How do we respond?