

Baccalaureate Mass

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

May 22, 2003 | St. Ignatius Church

The Gospel that you have chosen for this farewell liturgy comprises the opening lines of Jesus' first public preaching. From his very first words, Jesus declares that God's blessing falls on the sorrowing, the suffering and the struggling. It is they who in their efforts to cope with the hard circumstances of their own lives witness to the graced courage that comes only from God, whether acknowledged as such or not.

The Beatitudes we hear tonight bless God's special ones – those called to witness to the power and presence of God in our world. Their lives, quiet and often hidden from the bright lights of the world's stage, nevertheless witness to God's presence in the world. The Beatitudes certainly give us an upside down way of looking at ourselves and our world.

The world tells us to count as God's blessings health, wealth, success, status, influence and good looks. Well, maybe they are and maybe they aren't. Jesus does not bless those who have made it and are admired even envied by their peers. Those folks already have the "blessings" of their equals. The people who exchange the "high fives" of victory and success are not those whom Jesus blesses.

God's faithful ones are those who suffer unjustly; those who taste the bitter fruits of disappointment, know the frustration of working for what is right and seeing it fail, experience the emptiness and confusion of grief, and bear the wounds and scars of persecution.

A priest friend of mine who works in Harlem knows a 68 year old woman who has scrubbed floors eight hours a day since she was 18. She reared her six children without a husband and subsequently served as surrogate mother for her grandchildren. She lives in a three room flat with eight of her grandchildren and two of her own daughters. In the face of such a life, she told my friend, "God has been very good to me." He was blown away. That lady is closer to God than I could ever hope to be. That lady is special to God, and God is more at home in her desperately overcrowded apartment than in most of our churches. Her life was enriched by more than money. Blessed are the poor.

Rosa Parks was a seamstress coming home from a hard day's work in 1955; she simply refused to give up her seat in a Montgomery bus to a white passenger. She was tired of being pushed aside. They hauled her off to jail, and that set off the spark that ignited the flames of indignation that finally ended public segregation. Rosa Parks wanted more than a quiet ride home for herself. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.

Mahatma Gandhi never raised an army but he toppled the British empire in India. He was a well-trained lawyer, a devout Hindu, and an astute leader, whose only weapons were disciplined non-violence, prayer and fasting. They initially wrote him off as a harmless, hopeless idealist; his faith never wavered. Blessed are the peacemakers.

A student talked about the difficulties he faced in coming to grips with his own homosexual orientation. He feared the rejection of family members and the ridicule of

friends. He had to be as he was created to be by a loving God. He came out. It is not easy for him. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

When I visited inmates on death row in San Quentin two years ago, I was surprised at how easy it was to strike up a conversation with these condemned men, the supposed dregs of society. One young man of twenty-three had killed a convenience store attendant in a botched robbery that he attempted while he was high on drugs. He was a sophomore at USC at the time. I told him how sorry I was about his situation. He told me, "Father, don't feel sorry for me. I am paying for my mistakes. Feel sorry for the guys here who are poor, and can't afford magazine subscriptions, snacks, or television sets and whose families don't have the money to visit them. Feel sorry for the guys with severe psychological disorders who are treated like criminals rather than the sick people they are." No self pity here. Blessed are the merciful.

Today's Gospel is not about "oughts" or "shoulds" or "must dos" – none of us need to hear more about God commanding us to do this or that. Today's gospel is filled with the good news that God is present in our sufferings and our struggles. Today's gospel asks us to look below the surface of our lives and the lives of those around us to see God's action and presence in the world.

This evening and over the next two days, we will celebrate your success with the awarding of a diploma. But take this occasion to look beneath the pomp and circumstances of the moment to the real successes embedded in hidden stories and struggles of your own lives, and know that God was there with you. Take the time to remember those who walked hand in hand with you during the difficult moments of your life's journey, and thank the God who was with you.

The Beatitudes are not Jesus' version of the Ten Commandments nor are they an ethic or new code of conduct. Jesus is not telling us to be persecuted or impoverished. Jesus *is* telling us where God is working in the lives of ordinary people who evidence God's grace in their extraordinary faith and courage under the most difficult circumstances.

This Eucharist gives us a glimpse of God at work among us now. This may be the only place in the world where all people are treated with the same respect, gathered around the same table, nourished with the same food and drink – without any regard to the color of their skin or the size of their income or the correctness of their politics or the elegance of their dress. Look beneath the appearances and see what God is doing here now, so that you may continue God's work in your personal and professional lives beyond the confines of the hilltop. God Bless you.