

Baccalaureate Mass

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Readings: Is. 40:3-5 & 61:1-2a; John 1:6-28

The readings that you have selected are most appropriate for this baccalaureate liturgy, because today you receive your diploma from a University that would educate your mind and heart so that you may change this world.

The first reading describes in poetic language the changes the world must undergo in order to fulfill God's hopes for it: the chasms that separate peoples must be filled-in; steep and windy pathways made broad and flat for easy access to one another; rocky terrain transformed into broad valleys; hills and mountain barriers flattened out so they no longer separate us; barren deserts blossoming with life-sustaining flora and fauna. This admittedly idealized world reflects the deepest desires of God's own heart.

The heart of the God of Israel and of Jesus is that of the mother who when asked which of her children she loved most, scooped up into her arms her disabled son and answered, "this one because he needs me the most." Thus does this reading show us God's special concern for the poor, the brokenhearted, captives and prisoners—the very persons among us who are most vulnerable and in some cases even rejected and despised. Realize that God has absolutely no stake at all in the "Christmas tree" versus "holiday tree" debate that is the current focus of our culture wars. But God most certainly has a deep and abiding concern for the 30,000 children who die each day from hunger-related causes and the 2000 children who could be fed for an entire year with the money spent in one minute on weapons of war.

It should be obvious that we desperately need more people filled with God's Spirit and sent by God to show us the way of the Lord. There is not much in the way of "glad tidings" for the poor these days with Congress on the verge of approving a budget that cuts \$9.5 billion from Medicaid, denies 400,000 hungry people food stamps and takes away subsidized lunches from 60,000 school-aged children, while at the same time insuring tax benefits for the wealthiest 3% among us. We cannot mask such bad news for the poor by labeling it "fiscal responsibility" or "deficit reduction" or "government efficiencies."

The broken-hearted? How many communities, families and hearts broken by hurricane Katrina are being healed? How seriously are we pushing federal, state and local agencies to address the needs of those whom they abandoned during the Gulf Coast catastrophe—the elderly, the poor, children and persons of color? Now that their faces are out of our newspapers and off of our TV screens must they be absent from consciousness?

Captives? It took us months of debate to finally saying "no" to the question of whether our government agents should be given the option of employing cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of those we hold captive without legal recourse and for unknown reasons. Liberty is cruel hoax for these captives, and who cares? Apparently, God does.

And prisoners? The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any industrialized democracy in the world. Release of prisoners is a near impossibility with the prevalence of a “lock them up and throw the key away” mentality and a “three strikes and your out” penal code. We seek to punish, not restore and release. We systematically deny the ultimate human dignity of persons convicted of capital crimes by executing them for the basest of human motives: revenge. It may be hard for us to believe, but impossible to deny that these individuals remain the sons and daughters of God, created in God’s image and if despised by society, loved by God.

The Gospel presents us with the intriguing figure of John the Baptist. “Sent by God” we are told “so that all might believe through him.” “Believe what,” we may ask? Maybe John and others like him are sent so that we may believe in a God who is good and who can make of this world a place where there is good news for the poor, where the broken-hearted are healed, the captive respected and the prisoners released. This is “the way of the Lord.”

I am sure that such persons sent by God to shine God’s light into the dark recesses of our world often feel like lonely voices crying out in a barren desert of hostility and indifference. Yet there are among us those who do persist, and do make it possible for us to believe in a good and loving God who works through people like us to change the world, ever so slowly and at the most local of levels. Each of us can shine some light in the darkness.

On Wednesday I listened to two students talk about a USF Sociology course taught at San Quentin this last semester. It was moving to hear them explain how this experience taught them that convicted criminals, while they have done horrible things, are not monsters but human beings; that our system focuses almost exclusively on punishment; our prisons are bastions of racism that offer no hope to the incarcerated. For these students a chasm was bridged, a difficult pathway made easier, and formidable barriers removed. Thus did the world inch a little closer to what God wants it to be and these students moved further along “the way of the Lord.” This experience tapped into an empathy that called them to action; and it also offered them knowledge and skills so that such empathy led to effective and appropriate action. Theirs was an authentic “head and heart” experience, and those students made it a little easier for me to believe in a loving God who continues to change the world through people, as the Dalai Lama said here at USF, “with smart brains and warm hearts.” People like you.

My prayer for you graduates and for all us this morning is that we realize that we, too, are anointed with God’s Spirit of concern for the poor and the vulnerable; that, while we are certainly not God, each of our lives may bear witness to God’s love for the weak and the broken-hearted; and that our witness can encourage others to believe in God’s healing love and walk with us along “the way of the Lord,” which is the only sure path to the world that God is trying to create.

In a world where so many people are denied their rightful place at the table, let us gather for one final time around this table of the Lord where all are welcome, where all are equal, and where all enjoy the same food and drink. May we find here the strength and

companionship to live in God's Spirit and testify to the light that will lead us to a new and better world now and forever.