

Mass of the Holy Spirit

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
September 30, 2009 | St. Ignatius Church

Readings: Ephesians 2:17- 22, Luke 4:16-21

This Gospel marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; with these words Jesus defines himself and his mission. It is, if you will, Jesus' inaugural address. He stands, for the very first time, before those who have known him since childhood to publically declare the purpose of his life's work.

Jesus, citing Jewish scriptures, professes that he will henceforth be guided by the Spirit of God – that same Spirit who empowered the prophets of ancient Israel to speak the truth without regard for the consequences to themselves -- to proclaim a nation's responsibilities for the weak and the weary, the widow and the stranger. Today, in solidarity with Jesus and those other prophets, we invoke the same Spirit. We recommit ourselves, as a university, to pursue and proclaim the truth and to fulfill our God-given, Spirit-inspired responsibility for bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives, freedom to the oppressed and sight to the blind.

It is not "good news" to tell the poor that we cannot afford to give them medical care, but we can afford to spend \$800 billion dollars a year on the military, \$40 billion dollars on pet care, \$17 billion dollars on outer space and \$8 billion dollars on cosmetic make-up.

It is not "good news" to tell poor immigrants that their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are neither inalienable nor endowed by God. In fact, they come exclusively from the state and only with citizenship papers, and not from God at the moment of our creation.

Rather than "freeing captives" or "liberating the oppressed," our nation boasts the largest, most overcrowded prison system in the developed world, where the poor and persons of color are grossly over-represented. Just last week a California woman died in prison from throat cancer within a week of having her request for parole on humanitarian grounds denied. She wanted to die at home; she died in prison. Ours is a system that focuses more on punishment and revenge – three strikes and you're out -- than on protecting society from dangerous criminals. This is not good news for anyone. For how many years have inmates languished at Guantanamo without legal recourse or a rigorous effort to separate high-risk terrorists from no-risk innocents?

Like Jesus, we are charged with opening our eyes and the eyes of those blinded by nationalism, racism, sexism, political ideology and religious intolerance. Recall the rabbi who was asked by his students how one knows when night has ended and day has begun. The rabbi threw the question back to them. One student suggested that it was when there was sufficient light to distinguish a sheep from a dog; another said it was when enough light fell on the tree leaves to tell whether it was a palm or fig tree. The rabbi said,

“Those are good answers but not my answer. When you look into the eyes of another human being and see only your brother or sister you know that night has ended and day light begun. If you cannot see your sister or brother in every human being, it will always be night.”

The truth is that our world has a long way to go before the darkness of night yields to the bright light of day. Let us accept the challenge of scattering the darkness and ignorance that blind us to the common humanity that we share with all persons, no matter their color or politics or age or religion or income or sexual orientation; let us walk in the light of the truth that every woman and man is our brother and sister.

As we gather today from a variety of backgrounds and experiences – faculty and staff, student athletes and coaches, club members and student leaders -- let us recall the truth of the first reading: for persons and communities animated by God’s Spirit, there are no strangers or foreigners among us; we are all fellow citizens and members of the one household of God. Let us, together, truly make this “a year acceptable to the Lord.”