

Baccalaureate Mass

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Today's first reading is addressed to a people overshadowed by fear and walking into darkness. It is addressed to Israel facing an impending war with Assyria, and all the havoc that war entails. If the Israel, for whom Isaiah wrote his poem, was discouraged and anxious about the future and in need of hope, so are we.

Since you began your studies at USF, we have experienced in our own country that brutal terrorism which has plagued other countries for decades, we have endured the trauma clergy abuse of children and its cover by some bishops, we are now seeing the disastrous after-effects of war on the people of Afghanistan, unemployment and a sagging economy hang heavy over us, to say nothing of those who are beating the drums of war against Iraq.

To walk in darkness, to live in a land of deep shadow is to experience the need – the hope – for the one who can lighten our burden, who is called Wonder-Counselor and Prince of Peace – an endless peace because it is rooted in justice, not imposed by military might or economic coercion. With Israel of the 7th century before Christ, we twenty-first century citizens of this world long for the light and peace promised us for too long a time.

If we switch for a moment from the global – Israel, our world – to the personal, we transition to the gospel and Joseph, the husband of Mary. The joy and anticipation that followed Mary's acceptance of Joseph's marriage proposal, and that should characterize their engagement period has been overshadowed by the darkest of clouds – Mary's unexplained pregnancy. Joseph's joy is transformed into pain and fear with his decision to terminate the engagement and face the future without his beloved fiancée and the humiliation of betrayal by his intended wife.

Then Joseph dreams – new possibilities, a different scenario, a difficult future but one not permeated by fear, but rich with the promise of Emmanuel, God-with-us. To realize that promise Joseph must live the dream, make the decisions and take the steps suggested in the dream. This story about Joseph reminded me of Cervantes' Don Quixote who was dismissed as a hopeless dreamer of impossible dreams. At the conclusion of the musical, *The Man from La Mancha*, the dying Quixote declares, "when life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to surrender dreams is the greatest madness of all." Joseph's story evokes Martin Luther King and his dream of an American where "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sister and brother." Even of Jesus' dream that we may all live together as one family, just as he and God are one.

The gospel message for us is clear and particularly appropriate for you graduates. Do not abandon your dreams. Dream large inclusive dreams about world peace and international solidarity with the poor, about personal integrity in the face of ethical challenges and giving in culture that only values having; dream about feeding the hungry and housing the homeless and welcoming the immigrant. Those dreams are of God, even if subtly communicated and too easily dismissed by the worldly-wise as illusory and impractical.

The great African American poet, Langston Hughes said it beautifully in his poem, *Freedom's Plow*:

When a man starts out with his hands
Empty, but clean
When a man starts out to build a world,
He starts with himself
And the faith that is in his heart-
The strength there,
The will to build.
First in his heart is the dream.
Then the mind starts seeking a way.

The eyes see there materials for building,
See the difficulties, too, and the obstacles.
The hand seeks tools to cut the wood
To till the soil, and harness the powers of the waters.
Then the hand seeks other hands to help,
A community of hands to help-
Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,
But a community dream.
Not my dream alone, but our dream.
Not my world alone,
But your world and my world,
Belonging to all the hands who build.

In the doing of dreams, we will find God-with-us, Wonder-Counselor and Prince of Peace. A glimmer of light shines through darkness, the clouds slowly dissipate, the yoke weighing us down seems lighter because God is really is Emmanuel, God with us. God does save his people. As we gather around this table today we move closer to the realization of God's dream of a world where all men and women sit down to share a meal in peace.