

Baccalaureate Mass

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The first reading that a group of you selected for this graduation liturgy may reflect the ambivalence you are now feeling: affection and gratitude for those who have nurtured and supported you – parents, siblings, family, friends and teachers – mixed with trepidation about the future so that you, too, may protest “Ah Lord God, I am too young” for the next stage of your life. God says to you today what God said to Jeremiah, “have no fear, because I am with you.” God extends a hand, touches you and sends you out “to build and to plant.”

The Gospel excerpt from Matthew that you chose differs from similar passages in the Gospels of Luke and Mark where light and salt are metaphors for the teachings of Jesus. By contrast, in Matthew, light and salt are not teachings or doctrines but persons. “You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.” In the same vein, Jesus did not tell his followers, “I will teach you the truth so that you may teach it to others.” Jesus said, “I am the truth.” Truth and goodness are persons, not mere concepts. Truth and goodness are lived, not just taught.

I am reminded of a story that Anne Lamott tells in her book, *Blue Shoes*. She remembers a preacher talking about a mother who was putting her three-year-old to bed and as she left the room he pleaded with her not to go. He was afraid, he said. “Of what,” she asked. “The dark, being alone, night mares, your never coming back,” was his frightened response. His mother tried to reassure him by telling him that God would be there with him all night long. The child replied, “but now I need a God with skin on!” I need a God with skin on. We all do; and that is why God became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus. That is why Jesus is with us as we gather together around this table to hear God’s word and to share God’s gifts of bread and wine. “Have no fear because I am with you.”

Luther Vandross in “Dance with My Father Again” sings about how his father “would lift me high and dance with my mother and me and then spin me around ‘till I fell asleep. Then up the stairs he would carry me and I knew for sure I was loved.” The song recalls tender moments, now gone forever, when his father was “God with skin on” for him – he knew for sure he was loved. This is a good time for you to recall with gratitude all the people in your life who have caused you to feel loved, appreciated, valued, important, good about yourself – the people who have flavored and brightened your life; the people who have been salt and light for you. If Luther Vandross longs nostalgically to go back to a moment in time for “another chance, another walk, another dance with my father again,” we are called by God to share life and love now with a world that sorely needs both.

That is our calling. For better or worse, we have been chosen by God to bring the message we have received to others. This evening’s gospel suggests that we communicate that message more by our good works than by our good words. It is obvious that for faith and love to shine, they must be expressed in genuinely good deeds – redemptive deeds, compassionate deeds, deeds of practical justice and peace. Ritual and doctrine do not impress people. We need “a God with skin on.” We need to see the

world changing for the better, moving towards peace, structuring society more justly, expressing practical concern for the outcast, the marginated and the unfortunate. The world will know what we believe by what we do and who we are, not by what we say.

The gospel reminds us that we cannot cultivate a personal relationship with God without touching and responding to the needs of our brothers and sisters. The world needs God, not as a theological or philosophical concept, but as “skin.” We live in a world where those who suffer need healing; where the hungry need food and drink; the lonely need companionship; the homeless need shelter; the broken-hearted and the sorrowful need comfort; those who hunger and thirst for justice need to be satisfied. They need us and God needs us for their sake.

God calls us out into the world as a community and as individuals. Actually, we are already out there – we do not live our lives in this church building. We live out in a world struggling under the dark clouds of war in Iraq, escalating violence in the Middle East, a widening gap between the poorest and wealthiest among us, and the scandal of homelessness in our own city. This world needs your light.

When we encounter what we know is unjust and inhumane, how can we be anything but salty? The “salty one” sprinkles out compassion, love, justice, patience, helpfulness on every situation. We are the salt that flavors and preserves the world that God wants for all of us. We are the light of God’s love that shines amidst the darkness that engulfs too many people in our world.

The first book of the bible begins with the story of creation and God saying, “let there be light.” Today’s gospel and your Jesuit education tell you that you, not the sun, moon or stars, are that light that God created. God has called all of us, touched us, and enlightened us. God has confidence in us because God created us and sees that we are good. Let us come together to this table to receive all that God offers us here so that we may be salt and light for the world; so that we may be “God with skin on” for all the people we touch.