

Baccalaureate Mass

Homily by Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
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The gospel for today's graduation liturgy is well chosen. The message is apt and simple in content if somewhat complex in application. Joseph is told, "not to be afraid." That message echoes what Mary is told when she expresses concerns about becoming the mother of God-made-flesh in the person of Jesus. "Do not be afraid" is a recurring message throughout the gospel. Matthew begins his story with an angel telling Joseph not to be afraid and concludes 28 chapters later with Jesus telling his followers, "do not be afraid." God's word to you today is that reassuring message: do not be afraid to leave the Hilltop to take your place in the world.

Let me clarify what the gospel is not saying. It is not telling you to ignore a fundamental human instinct and recklessly pick up a hot skillet with bare hands or risk the consequences of substance abuse or dive off a high bridge into shallow water. Even more to the point, the gospel is certainly not telling you not to fear being subtly co-opted by a culture of comfort that makes us think only of ourselves, or a culture of waste that abuses our earth's limited resources, or a culture of indifference that is non-responsive to the suffering of others. Indeed the gospel cautions us to be afraid of whatever kills the spirit and hardens our hearts.

The imperative not to be afraid in Joseph's case – and every other instance in the gospel – is not to be afraid to do what is generous and kind, even when that runs counter to self-interest, religious tradition and demands of the law. At that time, to be betrothed was to be married but not living together. Mary was Joseph's legally wedded wife. Imagine Joseph's feelings when he realized that his wife was pregnant by someone else. But Joseph was a good person and loved Mary so much that he chose to quietly divorce her rather than humiliate her with a public trial and stoning as his religion and the law required. Joseph's love of Mary overcame his own pain, indignation and loss. "Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home" is not directed simply to Joseph. It is God telling each one of us not to be afraid to let love rule our lives and shape our decisions; not to be afraid to do what love asks of us.

God's word to Joseph came in the midst of a messy personal crisis. What could be worse than betrayal by the love of one's life? Coupled with the message not to be afraid is the corresponding reassurance that "God is with us." Remember the story of the little kid put to bed by her mother. As mom turns out the light and starts to close the door, the kid

screams, “don’t leave me alone.” The mother tells her daughter she is not alone; God is with her. The kid says, “I know but now I need a God with skin.” Matthew gives voice to Christian faith when he tells us that Jesus is “Emmanuel” God, become one with us – God with skin. God uniquely present among us in the flesh and blood of Mary’s son, Jesus.

Christmas is the story of God becoming one with us in Jesus; certainly not for God’s sake but for ours. God-with-us to save us. That’s what the name Jesus means. Jesus saves us from the power of sin, of course, but also from the fear of loving as God loves, selflessly.

Jesus, Emanuel, suffers and dies rather than abandon the love and compassion that God asks of him. Jesus dares to trust the God who through him heals the suffering, forgives sinners, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowing and associates with outcasts, even when this runs counter to self-interest, religious tradition and dictates of the law. And what a tragic mess this created for Jesus. But out of that mess God raised Jesus up to the fullness of life and thereby showed that God and only God is worthy of our unconditional trust. God is Emmanuel – with us – through the worst that life may throw at us. Tragedy, disaster and suffering are not the end of the story. We need not ever be afraid to love as God loves us in Jesus. What more could God do to reassure us?

So, graduates, as you leave the University to face new challenges, realize that the “God with skin” goes with you and also that you may be “God with skin” for the people who cross your path, as your family and friends have been for you along the way. Do not be afraid to do what love asks of you. We go together now to the table to receive the nourishment that God offers us so that we, in turn, may show the world that God is Emmanuel and inhabits our skin.