

“Christian Discipleship: Called from the World to be a Light to the World”

Mass of the Holy Spirit, Baccalaureate Mass

Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula

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As with individuals, so it happens with nations, that as they progress through their history, they pass through certain periods of development that are formative stages in their growth and their self-understanding — defining moments in these stages of growth. Thus it was for the ancient people of Israel in their experience of the Exodus event — the defining moment of their self-understanding and their understanding of their God, a liberating God, He came to the rescue to free them from the slavery of Egypt.

They pass through this period of 40 years in the Sinai Desert, sort of a period of growing pains, where God was forming them into a people peculiarly His own, as we heard in the first reading (Ex. 19:3-8a, 16-20b). He was testing them, guiding them, purifying them, so that they might recognize that He is the one true God, not the idols of their pagan neighbors. Most especially, He was winning them to Himself and defining them as His own, with the law that He gave to Moses on the mountain. There He revealed Himself to Moses, and He gave him the law — the *law*, not just a bunch of rules and regulations to help us all get along.

This law came from God, law meaning His teaching, the revelation to Moses of Himself, of His truth, a law that came from above, not of human construction. Moses did not form a committee to come up with laws by which these people could live as a community. God revealed the truth to him in the law that was to be the outward sign of the marriage covenant that He made with them, to show that they belong to Him, and that was to be a light to the nations of the one, true God. They were to obey this higher law, as the outward sign of this covenant.

But we know they had a rocky history. And there was a lot of backsliding. We hear the people cry out to Moses, “Everything the Lord has said, we will do.” But knowing what happens afterward, it sounds kind of like famous last words. They began to envy their powerful pagan neighbors and even began to make covenants with them, which meant that they had to adore their pagan gods.

We cannot do it ourselves. We cannot do everything the Lord has said ourselves. So God fulfills the covenant in Jesus Christ, so that Christ in us makes it possible. That is why St. Paul speaks of us being justified by faith, as we heard in the Letter to the Romans (5:1-2, 5-8). This is what Our Lord does

within us: He makes us just. It is our faith that is the necessary predisposition for this to happen, that is, a living faith, a faith that is informed by good works. We prayed in the Psalm for today's Mass, "Worship the Lord in holy attire" (Ps. 96:1-2a, 2b-3, 9-10a, 11-2). Looking at this from a New Testament perspective, we can sort of read between the lines here and detect, perhaps, a reference to the baptismal garment, the holy attire of Baptism, when the newly baptized puts on Christ and receives a new life of purity by the forgiveness of sins. That outward baptismal garment is the outward sign of the inner purity that Baptism gives us. The good works that we do are the continual outward sign of our baptism, the signs of this new covenant sealed forever in the Blood of God's son. We might call it our perpetual baptismal garment, the outward sign of our inner purification and adherence to Jesus Christ. It is that way that we can become a light for the world, the light of Jesus Christ.

We know, however, as stated especially in the prologue of St. John's Gospel, that the world rejected this light. We heard some very heavy, somber words from Our Lord in the Gospel for today's Mass, heavy words for His followers when He speaks about the world hating His disciples because the world hated Him first (Jn. 15:18-21, 26-27). I think these are words that penetrate our souls very sharply and deeply in the age in which we are living, a world which seems to be increasingly rejecting the light of Jesus Christ, He Who is the Truth, He Who is the liberating God, Who frees us from the true slavery to sin and selfishness and death and destruction and opens for us the path to true peace and freedom. This is the light for the world's good, and yet the world rejects it.

We must be alert to how the world has made inroads within our own souls, and how in our own ways we might reject the light of Christ, so that His justifying grace can continue to purify us, to make us more perfectly adhere to Him. The world needs us to be this light of Christ, to bring His peace and healing.

Two weeks ago in the office of the readings in the Liturgy of the Hours, we read from the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*, a reading which always strikes me very sharply with the profundity and the timelessness of the message. In one section of the letter, the author speaks about how the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. So if I may cite the somewhat lengthy quotation, the author says:

To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the entities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but does not belong to the body, and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world. The soul, which is invisible, is kept under guard in the visible body; in the same way, Christians are recognized when they are in the world, but their religion remains unseen.

The flesh hates the soul and treats it as an enemy, even though it has suffered no wrong, because it is prevented from enjoying its pleasures; so too the world hates Christians, even though it suffers no wrong at their hands, because they range themselves against its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and its members; in the same way, Christians love those who hate them. The soul is shut up in the body, and yet itself holds the body together; while Christians are restrained in the world as in a prison, and yet themselves hold the world together. The soul, which is immortal, is housed in a mortal dwelling; while Christians are settled among corruptible things, to wait for the incorruptibility that will be theirs in heaven. The soul, when faring badly as to food and drink, grows better; so too Christians, when punished, day by day increase more and more. It is to no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try to evade it.

It is the vibrancy of our faith that helps us respond to the this lofty call of the Lord in our lives as His disciples, a living faith, a faith in which the outward experience conforms to the inner reality. Actually, it cannot be otherwise; for life deprived of virtues, refusing to seek the pursuit of holiness — in such a life the faith within eventually withers and dies.

We have come together to celebrate this Mass, this sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ present to us upon the altar, by which He reconciles us to His father, and opens to us the door to justification and salvation. Today is a day especially to give thanks to Him for so many blessings, but most of all for the blessing of justifying faith.