

Baptism and What Occurred on January 6th

Recently we celebrated the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Jesus Christ. The scripture reading for this feast describes Jesus' entry into the Jordan River to be baptized by John and is very beautiful, vivid, and meaningful.

As we celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, we are also invited to recall our own baptism, through which we became one of God's children. Most of us received baptism when we were babies, so we may not remember the actual event but, believe it or not, what happened to Jesus happened to us – God called each of us to be a Child of God, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, color, gender, or age. That is the beauty of the baptism we have received.

Although I have been blessed to visit the site of the baptism of Jesus several times, I remember how traumatic my first visit to the Jordan River was for me. As we approached the river, there was a gate through which we had to enter, about maybe a mile from the river itself. When we entered, we saw signs at the sides of the roads that read "Danger! Land mines!" These signs were everywhere. When we arrived at the site of the Jordan River, I saw a river about 40 feet wide (which is not very wide) and the color of coffee with creamer added. This may look good for coffee but it does NOT look good for a river! The tour guide told me, "Father, we do not go into the water and we do not drink the water. You can sprinkle it but that's all."

That was very unsettling for me. Based on paintings and other depictions I had seen, I had such great expectations of this famous river. The reality of the Jordan River, however, was not at all what I expected. It took some time for me to reflect on this and realize that this site, with its land mines and dirty water, really represents a part of humanity. It represents our sinfulness, violence, greed, and indifference to God and humanity alike. This is what it is to be human.

The Baptism of Jesus Christ shows us that he entered into humanity, taking upon the ugliness of humanity in order to cleanse mankind – to bring us to be more like him. As is stated in Paul's letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:6-8), Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming

in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself. . . .” This is also our call, through our baptism, to be more like Christ and to humbly answer God’s call to be his own.

During our baptisms, we receive symbols. One of the symbols that you and I received was a candle. The priest or deacon who baptized us said, “Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He/She is to always walk as a Child of the Light. May he/she keep the flame of faith alive in his/her heart. When the Lord comes, may he/she come up to meet with Him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.” By saying that, and receiving this candle, we are reminded that we have become the Light of Christ. Not only for ourselves, but for others.

Now, if my guess is good, many of you received this candle for yourself or for your children and, very likely, kept it as a souvenir. It was probably put in a box and placed in the attic or a drawer or closet. That defeats the purpose! This candle you received during your baptism should be by your bedside to remind you of who you are and who God has called you to be. It’s very important, especially these days, to be the Light of Christ! In some cultures, they will take the baptism candle and use it for First Holy Communion, Confirmation, and, finally, when the person dies, the family will take the candle and put it in the hands of the deceased so that, when meeting Christ face to face, he/she can show that they received this invitation for eternal life.

We have been given the Light of Christ. Why is this so important today? Because we are called to shatter the darkness. We are called to bring the Light of Christ wherever there is darkness. As you saw, darkness fell on our nation January 6, 2021. For me, as an individual, as a citizen, and as a Christian, that day was very traumatic. It was as though I was reliving the past. This is similar to what happened to me in 1988, when I was a high school student in Yangon (then known as Rangoon), Myanmar. Our country was crushed by a military dictatorship and we were protesting for the pro-democracy movement. Although it was a peaceful and non-violent movement, many protesters were killed by the government. Through it all, whenever we felt down or discouraged, we would look toward the United States, especially to the building with a big dome – the Capitol

Building – and we would draw inspiration and encouragement and hope, that one day this would be a reality in Myanmar for all the people.

Now that I have lived more than half of my life here in the United States, I love this country. This is my home. I was appalled when I saw what was happening to our nation's capital - that it was invaded by insurrectionists. Let's call it what it is. On January 6th, we witnessed a domestic terrorist attack on our nation. The Capitol Building embodies democracy, not only for the United States but for many other parts of the world that look to this country, to this people, as a model of democracy – an example and an inspiration.

We have to remember that democracy is not to be taken for granted, especially after what we saw. Democracy is a fragile yet beautiful and precious gift that God has given to us, and you and I have the duty and responsibility to protect and preserve this right, as described by the U.S. Constitution, not only for ourselves but for many generations to come. Our duty to protect democracy can include protests but not violence and destruction. These unlawful actions and behaviors that we witnessed should not, and cannot, be part of us. We should not, and cannot, support – directly or indirectly – such actions in any form. If we do, we are extinguishing the Light of Christ that has been entrusted to us for the good of others, to preserve the democracy.

In a free, civilized, democratic society there is room for discernment. There is room for debate. There is room for discussion, sometimes even passionate discussion. But there is never room for violence – in word or in action. It cannot be that way! We have the responsibility to ensure that peaceful interaction is carried out.

You will remember that our nation has sent young men and women in uniform to other countries in crisis – countries like Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the world. The crisis started out in with ideology or a movement and then their governments and institutions moved to disenfranchise members of their own countries from the government. These autocrats acted in the name of “God”, or a religion, or their own self-proclaimed nationalism.

We cannot allow this in our own country. We cannot allow such actions and lawlessness - mob mentality, intimidation, the incitement of violence in words and action. There is no room for that! And this is especially true for us as Catholic Christians. We cannot be involved with such things. We must be the people who come together to protect this precious gift that God has given to us. It is our moral obligation to protect and preserve this democracy. This is so incredibly important these days. I hope and pray that you hear me out! Do not take for granted that, living in the United States, everything is just going to be the way that we want it. It is our duty and our responsibility, as Christians and as citizens of this nation, to do what we are called to do – to be the Light of Christ.

I hope and pray that there are better days ahead for our nation. There will be days that are not perfect but I pray that we never, ever see again what we saw on January 6th. It is our duty and responsibility – it is a holy commitment to our fellow citizens and to God - to do what we can do to ensure this never happens again. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, let us invoke the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, Zachariah and Elizabeth, and Mary and Joseph of Nazareth, to heal the psyche of our nation.

Recalling the sacrament of baptism that we have received, let us pray for the grace to remember that you and I are called to be the Light of Christ, and that we must keep our baptismal promises not just during Mass but outside of Mass. We must actualize this in our lives and in our words and deeds. May the Light of Christ never be dimmed in our nation.

May Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, ring in our hearts and minds and throughout our nation.