

The Baptism of the Lord

The trauma inflicted on our nation this week has disturbed Americans and shamed us throughout the world. Insurrectionists breached the walls of Congress to thwart the orderly exercise of democracy. We heard our president tell the criminals to disperse peacefully, but that he loved them, and that they were very special to him. Later he condemned their actions and threatened prosecution.

Bishop Johnston issued this statement on Friday: “Increasingly, we see that public protests and demonstrations have been marked by alarming incidents of violence and anarchy, including this week at the Capitol in Washington. As Americans, we have a right to peaceful protest and it can be an important public and moral action. Violence and lawlessness undermines our civic discourse and deepens the divides already so evident in our nation, and must be condemned. Our nation has many challenges and important problems that must be addressed with respect, good will and a seeking of truth and justice. Christians are to be a leaven in society, taking part as citizens grounded in the truths of Faith, but also providing a witness through conduct and a support of prayer. Conscious of this, I call upon our priests and people to include at this weekend’s Masses a prayer for healing for our nation. Only with God’s grace and assistance can we begin to heal and unite as ‘one people, under God, with liberty and justice for all.’”

In the United States of America, the president is chosen by the people, not by thugs. Power resides in the will of the many, not in the weapons of the few. For all the power-grabbing we witness in politics, in the workplace, even in churches, the declarations in today’s gospel provide better guidance.

John the Baptist must have possessed an extraordinary personality, a charismatic character, and captivating skills as a preacher. He attracted many disciples. He had power. But on one particular day, perhaps when people were singing his praises too strongly, perhaps when they invited him to their homes, humbly removed his shoes and washed his feet, John surprised them with this declaration: “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.” John had power, but he obeyed the mightier one coming after him.

When Jesus arrived from Nazareth, John baptized him in the Jordan. The heavens opened, the spirit descended upon Jesus as a dove, and a voice rang out from the heavens, a voice that proclaimed the source for the power of Jesus: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” In these opening verses of Mark’s gospel, Jesus has not yet said a single word. But already we know from testimony that he is the Son of God. He and John lived in a more corrupt political environment than we do. Their power saved neither of them from death. Their government used its power to kill them both. But it could not kill the gospel.

This week in our country the will of the people prevailed. The wheels of democracy turned once again. But we have all discovered how fragile it can be. As we commemorate the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry today, we remember the end of his earthly life when he told his disciples just before his ascension that all power in heaven and on earth had been given to him. He shares it with us. He expects us to use it not for our crimes, but for his gospel.