

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord  
January 9-10, 2021

*A bruised reed he shall not break*

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

It may seem peculiar that the suffering servant figure from the Book of Isaiah makes an appearance in the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This is a mysterious figure whose specific identity is less clear than his mission. The servant, we are told, will not make his voice heard in the street and “a bruised reed he shall not break.”<sup>1</sup> A bruised reed, he shall not break.

This is an image that expresses the gentle manner of the servant’s mission. He would accomplish his mission, not in a show of worldly power, but rather in the very deliberate choice to pass over the exercise of that power. The suffering servant was gentle and meek. This to the world is a sign of weakness, yet another example of how the world gets it wrong.

Meekness is not weakness. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that meekness “restrains the onslaught of anger,” adding that it “properly mitigates the passion of anger.”<sup>2</sup> People today are angry. We witnessed this throughout the “summer of unrest” and then again in a surreal display of anger and lawlessness at the U.S. Capitol last week. These episodes left in their wake a mixture of horror, disappointment, and yes, even righteous anger.

While not discounting people’s anger, even coming from opposite sides of the social and political spectrum, I know in my heart that there is a better way. Until and unless we recover a sense of human meekness in the face of difficulty, unless we commit to acting in a manner that will not break the bruised reed, our country can never heal. We will never become once again the great nation we are called to be. And that is simply so sad.

Clenched fists and gritted teeth cannot produce peace because they are utterly closed to it. Such an attitude only sows division and discord. By contrast, how did the suffering servant bring justice? What can we learn?

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 42:3

<sup>2</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II Q. 157

First, he was appointed and was not a lone ranger arrogating to himself a particular role. Christians see in the servant a pre-figuring of Jesus, a new kind of king who came to vanquish the power of sin and establish God's righteousness on earth. He did this, not by force, but by his lived example. He was the living embodiment of character, exhibiting both perfect gentleness and incredible strength. The two were not opposed.

Jesus did not answer insult with an insult. He prayed for his enemies; he loved those who rejected him. Increasingly today, people do not engage one another in real conversation, but settle for scoring political points by means of press conferences, tweets, memes and sound bites. People think that their serious issues and questions are not even being discussed.

In his own baptism, Jesus was engaging humanity by humbly subjecting himself to its own requirements. He did not think himself above what was called for by the law. He insisted on being baptized "in order to fulfill all righteousness" – an allusion perhaps to the justice-bringing mission of the Suffering Servant.<sup>3</sup> And he did so without crying out or shouting.

When people feel passionately about something, it takes self-control to refrain from lashing out and crying out. When people feel as though their rights have been trampled upon, they have a passionate response. Clearly passion in itself is not sinful– that is, unless and until that passion is no longer moderated by right reason. Then we have a major problem, one that must be addressed. Anger of this sort becomes a corrosive cancer.

The great and practical spiritual writer St. Francis de Sales had some great one-liners. While encouraging holiness among the lay faithful, he offered pithy images upon which to reflect. In one case he cautioned, "Always be as gentle as you can, and remember that more flies are caught with a spoonful of honey than with a hundred barrels of vinegar."<sup>4</sup> This is sage advice, and we have far, far too much vinegar in the salad dressing today!

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Mark Giszczak, "Jesus the Servant: Appointed and Approved," Catholic Exchange, Jan. 10, 2014

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Jean Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, page 78.

Our Baptism configures us to Jesus Christ, so let us pray for the grace to act accordingly. The vitriol we have witnessed is both destructive and counterproductive. In all that we say or do, may we imitate the gentle love of the Lord and pray for healing in our nation.

Through the Holy Spirit, our Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies, and sanctifies.<sup>5</sup> One early writer in the Church described Baptism as follows:

Baptism is God's most beautiful and magnificent gift.... We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift.<sup>6</sup>

May we never squander this precious gift or obscure it by means of anger and hatred. As we close the Christmas season for this year, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord serves as a valuable reminder of the importance of our own Baptism as the primordial sacrament of our salvation. By respecting and protecting its central role in our lives, we can cooperate to help to build a civilization of love and truth.

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<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 1227, Cf. *1 Cor* 6:11; 12:13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church para. # 1216, citing Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 3-4.