

Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist, June 24, 2018

One of my homily professors in the seminary, told us that in order to prepare a good homily you needed the newspaper in one hand and the bible in the other.

I use a bible, of course; I think I worn out two or three in all my years of preaching, the one I have now is well worn, and not that heavy. And I read the newspaper every day, as well as paying attention to editorials and TV news commentaries. In the past few days the newspaper has been pretty heavy, or at least the news has been resting heavy on my heart and I know on the hearts of all of you.

We have been outraged by the treatment of families who have been seeking a better life in this country, innocent people trying to cross the southern border to find safety, acceptance and basic human values.

What they have encountered has been the very opposite.

The separation of families, the deliberate detention of dependent children apart from their parents, has been, and continues to be a national disgrace, an embarrassment to decent citizens and an act of inhumane proportions not seen in this country for a very long time.

We have found ourselves in the same situation as those countries we have long condemned for their violations of human rights. We no longer can claim the moral high ground that we thought we owned.

The policy of treating families in this way has weaponized children for political purposes; it is not only unjustifiable in any political agenda, it is immoral.

The attempts by one official to justify this approach by quoting scripture reminds me of the phrase, "even the devil can quote scripture."

What are we to make of this situation, what are we to do?

First, we pray for those families and for the many good people who are charged with taking care of them on a daily basis, and the many volunteers who assisting – it can't be easy for them to be placed in such situations when many of them must have their families of their own. How can they not be repulsed by their job descriptions? And we thank those who step in as advocates for these families. Given the opportunity we would do the same thing.

Second, like John the Baptist, we need to raise our voices whenever and wherever we can to express our outrage. Whether in a casual conversation or in a more public forum if possible.

The reversal of this so-called zero tolerance policy a couple of days ago is not a solution, it is a small step, long overdue, in rectifying a situation that should never have happened in the first place. What is clearly missing is a mind-set of basic human goodness.

We have found that our spiritual reserves of tolerance and respect have been severely taxed and in some cases, turned to despising not only certain actions but certain people. We are almost as uncomfortable with those thoughts as we are with the situations that they have caused. We thought we were better than this, we want to be better than this.

God raised up the prophet Isaiah who thought he had toiled in vain and spent all his strength proclaiming God's justice. But he renewed his conviction that God chose him for a reason and proclaimed, "Now God is my strength; I will be a light to the nations". Isaiah sets a high course for himself, we could use his resolve and we could use more prophets like him today.

Paul says that God raised up David, whom God said is a "person after my own heart". We need to find that heart as a nation, and a leader who has such a heart.

And when John the Baptist was born, the people asked, "What then will this child become?" The parents of the children who have been taken from them must be asking, "What then will become of my child?" They should not have to ask that question or live in such fear. This is not just, it is not right, it is not acceptable!

Isaiah, David, John, Mary were destined to be servants of God from their youth; each of them became a vehicle of God's work. Even from "my mother's womb" Isaiah said. When we interrupt that potential by inflicting unnecessary and unspeakable trauma on another, especially a child, we sin against the creator, and we diminish ourselves as human beings.

No one ever maintained that bringing the light of the gospel onto the human journey, with its brokenness and its dreams, let alone its politics, was to be easy; but the gospel is always counter-culture, it is a critique of the current ideology. It is the moment for prophets of the gospel of mercy and compassion, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But we are a people of hope, and in every conversation, and in every moment when we ponder why is life like this, – even in those times that have an edge of sadness or rage, we mingle our cry with the cry of the poor, and at this time in our land we need to do that, we must do that.

May God hear us this time.

Phil Horrigan