

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord – January 9/10, 2021 – Reflection

In the years of slavery in America, Black men and women and children were branded with hot irons by their masters and owners as an indelible mark that they were then and forever property, that they belonged to someone, that they were not free to come and go as they pleased.

In the time of the Third Reich and the Nazi reign of terror in Europe, prisoners: Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, dissidents, Communists, clergy; were loaded onto railroad cattle cars and shipped off to work camps, death camps in Poland. Their arms were branded in ink with a number that would forever identify them as prisoners of the Nazis, however short or long their lives may be.

In the modern cities of the Americas; South, Central and North, members of gangs are branded in inked tattoos with symbols of the gang especially on or near the face to tell all they are in a gang and to remind the bearer of the mark that, once in, they cannot ever leave and hope to live.

Baptism, for most of us, is something that happened to us when we were little, tiny children. We were presented for it by others. They chose for us. They spoke for us. They made promises for us. Most of us have no memory of our Baptism. Most of us never chose to be Baptized. Most of us would not count that which we did not choose, that which we do not remember, as being one of the defining moments of our lives.

During His earthly life, Jesus called a very small group to follow Him - the Twelve and other disciples. Many, many other people were moved by what He did and said. But, they did not go so far as to become "members" of that "Jesus group." People went out to see Him, hear Him, admire Him, but then they went back home to their own lives.

It was different after His death. He died as a marked man, a criminal, an enemy of the state, an enemy of the religion of the Jews. After the so-called Resurrection, when the disciples preached about Him, they faced fierce opposition. If people wished to commit themselves to the way of life Jesus taught, they couldn't simply come and see and listen and admire and then, go back home to business as usual. The stakes were too high ... it was a matter of life or death. They had to commit themselves to be part of this group, this "Way," that would later be called "Christians." They had to participate in some clear and public sign that they were taking this step. Peter, the Apostle, said: "Repent and be Baptized!"

You are marked men: women and men, elders and babes in arms, people here and people watching at home, people on fire with zeal for the Father's house and people who have forgotten their call, growing cold and distant. You have been branded with the oil of Holy Chrism as priest, prophet, and royal heir to an inheritance gained by the blood of Christ shed on the cross, watered by the blood of the martyrs shed for the faith. You have been signed in water as a member of the Body of Christ, the community of faith, the Church. You have been marked as a member of a minority group in the world, marked as a Christian, counted among the followers of the Man from Galilee.

But the mark of Christ is not visible like inked numbers on your forearm. The mark of Christ is not burned into your flesh like the slaver's brand. The mark of Christ is not pigment on your face or neck or forehead like the gangster's tattoo.

The mark of Christ, the mark of the Christian is etched upon your heart, your soul where only God sees. You can show that mark by the life you live, by the worship you offer, by the service you give ... "Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."

But, if you choose, by the life you lead, by the worship you fail to give, by the gospel you refuse to stand for, you can hide the mark ... no one will see, no one will ever know.

Nevertheless, you have been marked as one of His, a Christian. Over two millenia, there have been thousands of marked men who have hidden the mark, Judases who have betrayed and fled into the night.

You are a marked man, a member of His band, a part of the Jesus movement. You can wear that mark as a badge of honor and walk all the days of your life in His footsteps, or you can be lukewarm, lapsed, fallen away, ashamed. You can cover the mark, run away, hide from the call and no one will come with dogs and torches and ropes and chains to drag you back.

Because of Baptism, you are a marked man: marked for Christ, marked for the Church, marked for service. Claim it ... own it ... you are a Christian. Hide the mark ... march to the beat of your own drum ... suit yourself ... it's all up to you, but do not then claim to be what you are not ... do not then call yourself a Christian.

