

**Hebrews 7:23-28**

**Psalm 34**

**Mark 10:46-52**

**My teacher, let me see again**

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“Teacher, let me see again”, asks Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, sitting by the roadside as Jesus left Jericho.

Most of us know this story pretty well, so I won’t spend too much time on the details, other than to note that the miracle in the story – the opening of Bartimaeus’ eyes – is the miracle we are ourselves to expect when we gather in this way to hear and consider these accounts of the ministry of Jesus. The question to bring to the text is not whether Jesus “could” open a blind person’s eyes, but whether we are sure *we* can see.

The religious and the secular

So, rather than unpack our text directly this morning, I want to invite you into a space about which I’ve been recently pondering. This space is the rise of what is being called “Christian nationalism”, in the US, as well as in Europe and part of South America. What is there to see here?

What is interesting about this resurgence of religious identity at a political level is that it is happening now, after several generations of a predominantly secular outlook in the modern liberal West. In Western societies, religion has been reduced to an optional concern within the wider range of human pursuits which make up the secular city. Secularity has served as a kind of political and social neutrality which allows for religious conviction but does not require it. The secular is the universal – common to all – and the religious (and other things) are options within that universality.

On the face of it, the resurgence of religion within some social and political spaces looks to be a simple anti-secular move in which religion is reasserted as having public relevance: the churches (or mosques, etc.) are fighting back. But the resurgence of religion can be read to have less to do with conventional religion than the rejection of social, political and economic universals which deny local interests and commitments. This includes the rejection of many of the conclusions and impositions of Western secularism.

Religion is a useful means by which local or national communities can protest against a prevailing universalist order. If the religious are outsiders or a subset within a secular national or international liberal polity, then we can reject an imposed universalism like Western secularity by appearing more religious. The intention here is less to be religious than to be politically and culturally particular, against perceived imperialisms imposed from without. Such communities are not so much “religious” as just non-secularist, if acceptance of secularism means assent to a set of political, economic and anthropological narratives which we experience as oppressive or alien.

The irony here is that the secularism of Western liberalism has started to seem rather parochial, rather limited, rather like a religion, despite having no commitment to a god conventionally understood. And so as certain polities claim their religious heritage, they do it explicitly against the West: the West is not our religion.

Everything turns into religion

Of course, the secularist doesn't want to look religious. Yet if, as the secularist holds, religion is divisive, it is reasonable to characterise what is divisive as broadly religious. And so it has become almost passé [to observe that](#) we “now live in broad settled ideological tribes,” which tribes “demand from us a devotion to orthodoxy and they abide not reason, but faith.” (to quote from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2022 Reith Lectures [the BBC])

Faith and religion are usually invoked in this way to signal decay; the notion is usually that common experience and rationality have been abandoned and we are back in the realm of metaphysics and credulity. But it is just as possible that this new religi-fying of human existence is less a zombie-esque paroxysm of the previously suppressed disease of religion than the re-cognition of an ineluctable reading of the human – *homo religiosus*, the human tendency to construct fractious, religio-cultural political systems and, through these, to project universalised transcendences which suck the rest of the world into them.

The important point is that modernist secularity, with its intention to bind with certain social and political norms, is experienced by many as divisively religious in this sense. Adichie's suggestion, then, that we “now” live in broad settled ideological tribes, is inadequate; the difference between “now” and the implied non-tribal “before” is not the recent emergence of religion-like ideological tribes but the re-cognition of what was previously *de*-cognised: the human as tribal, ideological, religious. The old turtles are now displaced by pieties and devotions: it's religion, all the way down.

“Religion”, of course, is redefined here as what develops when two or three of us gather with intent. But if the redefinition holds, the current resurgence of religion in politics is not the political problem to be treated. Rather, this resurgence is simply the resurfacing of our Midas-like capacity for turning everything into religion, even our secularity. If I – a nation even – wish to resist the imposition of someone else's idea of what I should do or be, religious identity is an effective means of resistance. Contemporary religious resurgence takes a nationalistic shape because borders are convenient fault lines for breaking away from oppressive socio-political impositions. In this, nations are less claiming themselves as profoundly Christian, Muslim, or Hindu than they are simply being polities with majorities having a particular religious heritage, which is useful for reinforcing a distinct local identity.

*This is to say that politics becomes inherently theological.* To say that religion is both universal and problematic is to say that the political problem is the religious problem; there is no neutral politics, certainly not “democracy”. And it is to say, further, that conventional religion is no convenient scapegoat for explaining our fracturing political compromises, as if human religiosity were a disease which could be treated. The resurgence of religion is a response to secular religion itself. “Christian” nationalism is not the problem; the deep-rooted and divisive religion of nationalism is: Make [America / Hungary / Brazil / Poland / Russia / etc.] Great Again.

Any lamenting of the resurgence of religion, then, misses the point. If it is true that our tendency is always to be divisively religious even as we try to be secular, the political question becomes not what to do with religion but which is the best kind of religiosity for the future of humankind. This is because it is the best religiosity which gives us the best secularity, the best political unity.

Eighty years ago, the Christian thinker Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sitting in a Nazi prison in Tegel, thinking through the relationship between particular religious experience and universal human experience. In his own case, he asked how Christian religion could be more than just for God-botherers, or the weak or the fearful? How does the God of all

things break out of the confines of local religious identity into the wider world, speak from a particular tradition into all traditions?

Central to Bonhoeffer's tentative thinking here was the idea of "religionless Christianity". To modern minds, of course, this is a contradiction in terms, for what is Christianity if not a religion? And so what is it but limited and divisive?

The simplest explanation is to look at the example of Jesus himself, whose own existence we could say was "non-religious religious". Again, this seems a contradiction in terms: as a Jew, Jesus looks to be thoroughly religious. And he is, in the way that we all are, one way or another.

Yet the Jesus who matters here is not the one defined by synagogue attendance but the one who *stands simultaneously for and against his religious tradition*, necessarily religious in some mode but not limited by that religiosity. This is a religiosity "for" others rather than over against them, a particularity which connects rather than isolates. Jesus stand as one *for* others, rather than against them. As a man who sees, Jesus is "there for" Bartimaeus, the one who does not.

This, of course, is precisely what is not happening in the resurgence of so-called Christian nationalism. Nations are doing what they have done pretty much since the rise of the nation-state – making themselves great. And, as has also been the case since the rise of the nation state, religion has been pretty useful for this – so useful that the nation and the religion tend to coincide and feed from each other.

What can we do about this? Jesus' own fate is sobering – his purported resurrection notwithstanding – as was Bonhoeffer's own fate. This may be what Christian maturity – religionless religiosity – looks like in a radically religious world: an actual or metaphorical death at the hands of the dominant religion, society and politics of one's day: a death for God at the hands of the gods, a death for the other at their own hands.

Thinking this way about what is happening with religion in the world at the moment (and all moments) doesn't give us an easy out. It simply clarifies what is happening and what is at stake. Whether it is conventional religion, or secularist and philosophical variants, religion is everywhere, and it's killing us, as it always has.

We are in this place today to hear about Jesus only because we hope this might be a place where we might, with Bartimaeus, see such things a little more clearly. And if we do, then the invitation is clear: Let us, again with Bartimaeus, throw off the heavy cloak of religion and follow Jesus "on the Way".

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