

Religious Humanity or Divine Humanism?

Today's gospel lesson is the pivot point of Mark's Gospel.

Eight chapters in, eight to go.

The first eight chapters are a wham bam thank you ma'am rush to tell us about the marvelous healing Jesus brings..... while his followers struggle to understand who he is.

The second eight chapters slows way down, as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, and along the way tries desperately to open the eyes and ears of all who will look and listen.

And what Mark's Gospel pivots on today is the difference between man-made religion and God's dream for humanity.

It's why today, in Mark's Gospel, the chief priests and scribes and other religious big shots make their first appearance.

Jesus is about to tell us, in his explosive confrontation with Peter, what the difference is between man-made religion and God's dream for humanity.

It is perhaps the most crucial conversation in the entire Gospel, not just then, but today, as we live in a world swimming in man-made religion, religion that Jesus comes to put an end to.

Okay, you may be wondering, he hasn't preached for a while.....what the heck is he talking about?

Here's the thing.

We love to create religions.

Whether it's the ancient worship of gods like Baal or Madam Pele or Zeus, or today's New Agers or Scientology and yes, even significant swaths of what is called Christianity — it's man-made religion; and this is what it looks like.

It is a system of beliefs and actions that create classes of insiders and outsiders, and if practiced regularly, usually with ritual sacrifices, promises to protect us from the problems and crises of this world, and, when the time comes, hand us a ticket into the next world.

ISIS is a man-made religion, that plague masquerading as Islam, that is consuming the Middle East, with its promises of paradise to those who treat their fellow human beings with a barbarity that is breathtaking.

But you can also think of just about every mainline church on every Sunday morning right here in the United States.

To the extent that people show up thinking that if they say their prayers and receive the host, they will be just fine in this life and the next, that we merely need to admire Jesus and thank him for what he did, that God is blessing the status quo, and we are deserving of the wealth and power and privilege that we enjoy, well, that's just as much a man-made religion as ISIS is, just without the immediate gore and grief surrounding it.

It's man-made religion that Peter has in mind when he confesses Jesus as the Messiah.

He's thinking warrior king!

He's thinking power and prestige and glory....and he's thinking to rout the Romans, throw out the high priests and other big shots; at every turn, Peter is thinking Us Against Them, with a sure set of winners and a sure set of losers.

And Jesus confronts this kind of thinking with an anger and a finality seen no where else in all of the gospels.

This kind of thinking: that religion means placating the gods; that religion is a bargain between us and the almighty, and if we do our part, we can not only rest secure that we will be well by the standards of the world (like respect and power and economic security and good reputations), but we can also gladly put on the robe of the "pious who accuse the sinner, who uphold tradition against God, who prefer the security of religion to the insecurity" of mercy and kindness. Jennings, *The Insurrection of the Crucified*, 127.

“Get behind me Satan!”

Because this kind of thinking is indeed Satanic: meaning, it is seductive, it is attractive, it is easy to fool ourselves into embracing Satan’s way rather than God’s way, and therein lies the mortal danger to each and every one of us.

My niece spent quite a bit of time studying religions and she came away with the view that Christianity is really no different than the earlier pagan religions that were and still are widely practiced.

She learned about Greek stories of gods who died and rose; giving to their followers a good life on earth and a rewarding after-life if only they believed in such a god; if only they paid the god some homage.

She concluded that Christianity is simply a different fruit from the same tree, and to the extent that our faith has traveled down Satan’s road, the road of security and power and judging others and excluding still others.....to that extent, she is exactly right.

But this is not the faith we are called to.

And that’s what Jesus is telling us today.

And if you think what Jesus has to say is only for the inner circle, only for the clergy and the like, then you would have it wrong.

Because while he castigates the inner circle in private, when it comes time to help us see what God’s true design is for all of us, he brings in the crowd, gathering us all in tight, and he explains.

It is about the cross.

Taking up our cross doesn’t mean those days in Lent when we give up chocolate or red wine.

It doesn't mean looking for ways to suffer, it doesn't mean cheerfully bearing the illnesses and foibles that come with life; and it certainly doesn't mean a person in an abusive relationship ought to stay put rather than getting out.

Taking up the cross means to take the side of the poor and the marginalized; to take the side of the weirdos and the nut bags.

It means saying no to war, no matter the circumstances, no matter the perceived justness, no matter the claims of supposed necessity.

It means to sit with civil rights legend John Lewis as he explains that the power of non-violence, and its challenge, is in placing your body over mine as the club is swung.

It means rejecting the jingoistic hyperbole that seeks to create classes of Us against Them, that seeks to close borders and deny basic human dignity; all to protect the privileges we have come to enjoy.

This is the difference between man-made religion and God's dream for humanity.

We so often create religions that separate and maim and destroy – all with the blessing of our man-made god.

But Jesus insists that the only true God has a dream for humanity; a dream that is born anew whenever a kindness is shown, whenever a forgiveness is granted, whenever mercy trumps revenge.

It is our nature to struggle with man-made religion because God's dream for us always carries a high price.

It is the price of giving away our life.

"But here's the thing: we tend to think that life is something you go out and get, or earn, or buy, or win.

But it turns out that life is like love, it can't be won or earned or bought, only given away.

And the more you give it away, the more you have.

In fact – and as first time parents experience profoundly – only when you love others do you most understand what love really is.

Likewise, only when you give away your life for the sake of others do you then discover life.” David Lose.

And so “we are called not only to make sure that the most marginalized have a place at the table, but also to recognize whose table it is.

The table around which we gather belongs to Jesus, who sees, as Peter in today's gospel does not, that true power is made perfect in self-giving love, that the way to abundant life is through the Cross – turning the symbol of humanity's brokenness and power and domination, into a sign of peace and freedom and life.” Sarah Breuer, paraphrased.

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