

Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church at Rosemont

SEPTEMBER 2026 SPECIAL MEDITATION SERIES: JESUS AND POLITICS

*Written in autumn of 2022, this special Meditation, with its focus on one topic, **Jesus and Politics**, is appropriate today, in 2026. It is a topic that will always be worthy of reflection and analysis, consideration and conversation ... for our benefit, for the church, and for our shared life in communities and nations.*

Introduction

I've heard the words often. Perhaps you have, too: "I don't want politics mixed in with my religion. Politics has no place in religion." Some people who said those words have left the church. In ways they don't realize, they also left, they walked away from, the most important and influential political thinker in human history: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus never identified with a political party or group. He never aspired to political power, carried a sign, or endorsed an individual. But what he said and why he said it ... what he did and why he did it ... were, undeniably, focused on how people live as individuals and in community, how they treat one another, how they govern and are governed, how they serve each other and how they are served, and how they should relate to one another: with respect, compassion, equality, and justice. All of this, from Jesus's time to ours – this living and working together in a structure that provides for freedom, common good, resolution of disputes, protection, and access to the necessities of life – is defined as 'civic' or 'political'. We think of 'political' in terms of parties, candidates, and campaigns. But 'political' relates to the word 'polity', meaning an organized human society. For Jesus, this structure for living went from small (families and worship communities) to huge (a country and many countries together).

We may think the politics/religion issue is new. It isn't. It has surfaced all over the world, for centuries, with various faiths and political systems. Through all these centuries, it has often been religious and political leaders themselves who have linked the two, almost always for their own gain and advantage. More than 2,500 years ago, as the Israelites endured exile and conquests by Romans, Babylonians, and Macedonians, their high priests became the connecting link to their foreign rulers. Although the high priesthood of the Israelites was a religious office, it became quasi-political, in part because of necessity (someone had to represent the people to their conquerors), and because, in most cases, the high priestly class benefitted personally from this connection, even as their people suffered. In Roman times, Caesar reflected the politics/religion link when he demanded to be worshipped as a god. Popes and princes made holy and unholy alliances through the centuries. In 1804, at his coronation as Emperor of France, Napoleon I turned to Pope Pius VII, took the gold laurel crown from the Pope's hands, and placed it on his own head. Whatever else he was conveying, Napoleon was linking temporal (political) and religious authority. In 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany addressed his soldiers, saying,

“... the German people are the chosen of God. On me, the German Emperor, the spirit of God has descended. I am His sword, His weapon, His vice-regent.” More than 25 years later, church and chancellor met in two contrasting ways, with German church officials either endorsing Hitler and Naziism (at least turning a blind eye to them), or courageously opposing them, as did the martyred Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the dozens of pastors who formed the Confessing Church, declaring that their “allegiance is to God and scripture, not to a worldly Fuhrer”.

In our 21st century, the religion/politics question is important enough to warrant a fact-based, objective, analytical look; a review of what, for Christians, is the only reliable source of wisdom on this topic—the words and actions of Jesus himself. For this month, the Meditations will travel back to the life and times of Jesus; to his world, his teachings, his words, and his actions. While hundreds of hours of reading, research, and fact checking have gone into this Meditation series – using scripture; scholarly¹ books and writings; Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic words; and the writings of first-century historians Tacitus and Josephus – it could have easily been far more. The topic itself is both current and timeless; worthy of exploration and consideration. Ours can only be a partial look at what Jesus said and did. But that look matters, not only to our understanding, but also to those who have walked away from the church, and to a world that needs, more than ever, the guidance that Jesus offers. This special series is an unusual departure for the Meditations, in focus, length, and detail. But our nation’s divisions, as well as the misrepresentations and rancor that seem to have poisoned our shared life and discourse, make such a focus appropriate. This month: **Jesus and Politics**.

Looking at Jesus

We begin at the end, at the cross, at that hill on which the horrifying act of crucifixion took place. Even in that time of brutality, crucifixion stood out. It was the most agonizing, most shameful punishment the Roman Empire could inflict. When Jesus traveled and taught, healed and helped, he was not the only preacher going from town to town, region to region: Bethsaida to Sychar, Bethany to Jerusalem, Galilee to Judea. Countless other itinerant preachers were gathering crowds – some more, some fewer – as they spoke of their beliefs, promises, or predictions. But history records only one such preacher who incurred the wrath of Rome so powerfully that he was put to death by crucifixion. Jesus did not anger Roman authorities, and he did not frighten the Jewish Pharisees, by saying “*Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden ...*” (Matt. 11:28) or “*Suffer the little children to come unto me*”... (Matt. 19:14). He could have said such things day after day, year after year, without causing Caiaphas, much less Herod, any concern. A meek and mild, non-political Jesus would have been, at most, a nuisance,

¹ *Special acknowledgment to the works of Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., PhD, visiting research scholar at Columbia University, formerly professor of Biblical Interpretation at New York Theological Seminary, and of Tod Lindberg, senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, formerly of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University*

never a threat. Jesus was nailed to that cross, on that hill, because he dared to challenge the rulers and political systems of his time. What he said in first-century Judea and Galilee was nothing short of radical. He said all people – including, and especially, the poor and the outcast – were beloved children of God, deserving freedom, respect, protection, justice. Seventeen hundred years before Thomas Jefferson penned the words “unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”, Jesus was proclaiming the human right to those same blessings. In Jefferson’s time, that idea was almost unprecedented. In Jesus’s time, it was almost suicidal.

Jesus dared to criticize the Jewish high priests as well as the Roman rulers, calling their treatment of the common people what it was: oppression and abuse. He invoked the Jewish principle of ‘*malkuth shamayim*’ – the sole sovereignty of God – and threw it in the faces of priestly and Roman elites who usurped the place of God in people’s lives. Jesus dared to say that we are all children of God, that God is within us; a concept often minimized or ignored. Although, in John 10:34, Jesus quotes Psalm 86:2: “*I tell you, you are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.*” Whether he meant that we have God-given attributes, or that we are one with the substance and spirit of God, Jesus was saying something that infuriated Jews who taught the law. Finally, Jesus said he was the Son of God. This not only offended and enraged the Pharisees and Sadducees, it threatened them and their power, privilege, and control. In what he said and what he did, Jesus knowingly and deliberately challenged the secular and religious power systems, the political systems, of his day. Why would a sane man do such a thing? Jesus did it to show us a way – God’s way – of living in wholeness and peace, in our ‘polity’, in his time and in all times. What compelled him to take the risks of preaching such a revolutionary message? For that, we must look, next, at the world in which Jesus lived.

Jesus’s World

Flavius Josephus, a first-century historian, records that, around the time of Jesus’s birth, oppressed Jews in the Galilean city of Sepphoris, a few miles from Nazareth, revolted against Roman brutality. The Roman response was swift and massive. Josephus noted that the city was burned, many were taken into slavery, and more than 2,000 people were crucified as punishment for the revolt. That number seems extreme, but in the last century B.C., “the armies of Rome destroyed complete towns and slaughtered, crucified, or enslaved entire populations.”² The Roman practice of not allowing dead bodies to be removed from crosses until they had decayed was especially enforced, as a lesson to all other regions, after the revolt at Sepphoris. People for miles around were surely affected by the magnitude of the slaughter: first, the screams; then, the stench. Undoubtedly, the Jews in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, were aware of this horror. The poor and the powerless must have been especially afraid. Historian A. N. Sherwin-White wrote that “the world of the Gospels reflects two classes, the very rich and the very poor.”³

² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14:105

³ Sherwin-White A. N. *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* p. 139.

The wealthy and powerful had little to fear and much to enjoy. The common Jews – including Mary and Joseph, Jesus, their families, friends, and neighbors – had little on which to live and much to fear.

These common people, among whom Jesus grew up and lived, were not only impoverished, they were exploited and subjugated. Their oppression came from Roman rulers, and from their own priestly classes: the Sadducees, Pharisees, Nazarites, and Essenes. Taxes to Rome could be 25%-35% of whatever income, crops, livestock, or goods the people had. The high priests also required a tithe (10%) to the temple coffers, as well as ‘voluntary’ offerings, to show people’s faith. The Sadducees had wealth, influence, and mutually beneficial relationships with the Roman overlords; one served the other, and both exploited the common people. Seizure of property by Roman soldiers was common – houses, animals, belongings – and those who were robbed had nowhere to turn for justice. Rape of women and girls was so common, so much an everyday occurrence, that it was barely mentioned; again, with no recourse for justice. Women were the lowest-ranked people, even among the poor and outcasts. When Jesus dared to speak with women, listen to them, treat them with respect, and even include them among his inner circle, he was doing something almost unheard of in his time.

Not only did some high priests betray their people, in demands for ‘offerings’ and collaboration with Roman authorities, but some demeaned the common Jews, calling them ‘*amei ha’aretz*,’ literally ‘people of the land’. According to many scholars, this was a derisive term, used as some today might use the ‘N-word’ toward Black people, or call others ‘white trash’. To high priests, Jesus was ‘*am ha’aretz*,’ a crude, coarse person, one who is detestable, one without intellect, understanding, or even reputable character. It is interesting to think of how the priests, who challenged and questioned Jesus during his ministry, must have felt when profound, thought-provoking, and unassailable answers (“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”) came from the mouth – from the mind and heart – of Jesus, of this ‘*am ha’aretz*’. In the Lord’s Prayer, which we will look at closely, Jesus directly addressed the miseries and burdens of his people with a clarity and commitment that the priests could not combat, further threatening their authority and control.

From childhood on, Jesus was a devout Jew. He worshipped and he prayed. He kept customs and holy days. He studied the Torah and could read and quote from it. Jesus was intelligent and insightful. He also possessed what we call ‘emotional intelligence’— empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of others, to relate to others and respect their lives and thoughts. Jesus saw the world around him, especially people’s suffering, and he knew, in both his human and divine wisdom, that this was not what the God of creation, the God of his ancestors, decreed for humanity. He said that his mission was to “bring good news to the poor”, but he also said he came “not to bring peace, but a sword”. He confronted and challenged the power systems of his day, and the people who perpetuated them. To think that Jesus ... this intelligent, perceptive, caring man ...

was oblivious to his surroundings, to the power structures, to the sufferings of the people among whom he lived, is to think of him as a fool or a fraud. He was neither. Jesus's words and teachings were not random, thoughtless utterances. They were grounded in ... and bore witness to ... the world in which he lived, as well as to the Spirit of God which lived in him.

Turning the World Upside Down

After his baptism by John, Jesus retreated into the wilderness, to think, to pray, to contemplate his mission and calling. For Jesus, this 'time apart' was lengthy, perhaps weeks, and he included fasting in his solitary time. In the wilderness, Jesus faced four temptations from a being scripture calls Satan, or 'the tempter'. Each of these temptations was a test, aimed at human weakness, need, and desire. In each case, Jesus not only resisted the temptation, he powerfully rebuked the tempter. This might seem to be a simple biblical account ... until we look at ourselves. Most of us fail miserably at this matter of temptation. Many of us can't say no to a drink, a bit of gossip, or a chocolate cookie. Jesus said no to Satan. By the time Jesus left the wilderness to begin his ministry, he had a power and a focus, a courage and a strength we can barely imagine.

After his time in the wilderness, Jesus chose his disciples, and he traveled through Galilee, teaching and healing. More and more people came to hear him. Matthew writes that his fame spread "even into Syria". Jesus was saying things people had never heard before. He spoke to people as if they mattered, as if they had value. Jesus clearly had a personal warmth, a kindness which drew people to him. Seeing a great crowd one day, he walked up onto a mountainside and spoke to the people. His words formed 'the Sermon on the Mount'. In many ways, these words were the keystone – the center – of his teachings. His words, especially the Beatitudes ("Blessed are ..." Matt. 5:3-12), did nothing less than turn the world upside down for his listeners. It is the persecuted who will be blessed, not the persecutors; the peacemakers, not the soldiers and warmongers; the pure in heart, not the powerful. People who lived in fear were told to let their light shine, to not hide it, to live in the light of their holy creation and in the light of God's love. But as Jesus's words turned the world upside down in a positive way for 'the least of these', they turned the world upside down for Roman rulers and priestly elites in a threatening way. Any elevating or freeing of common people would erode the authority, and the income and control, of their rulers. There would be much to lose for those in power if people believed Jesus's teachings. A new order would not be their order. The days of the Empire would end. Jesus knew what his words meant, but he still dared to say them. Herod and the Pharisees also knew what they meant. For them, "the days of abusive privilege are already numbered."⁴ In those first days of Jesus's ministry, his own days were also already numbered.

⁴ Lindberg, Tod *The Political Teachings of Jesus* p. 29

One of the extraordinary things about Jesus's teachings is that they apply to our lives now, here on earth, as well as to the life to come. It would be easy to read the Beatitudes and think that Jesus was comforting the downtrodden with only the promise of a better life to come: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." But Jesus wanted relief and release for people now, here on earth. He wanted justice, freedom, and an end to oppression and subjugation. At least four of the nine Beatitudes can be read as referring to blessings in this world: the merciful receiving mercy now, when it is needed; the meek ... the gentle ... inheriting the earth; those who mourn being comforted now, not at a future time when their grief is long spent; those desiring righteousness finding it now, in this life, not only in a future life already defined as fully righteous. These words were heard by people so poor and oppressed – with so many burdens and with so many layers of authority over them – that they never dared dream of such assurances or promises.

In these verses, and in the teachings and parables that follow (Matt., Chapters 5-7), Jesus describes what a just, right, and God-centered world would look like. Jesus was not delusional. He knew that such a transformation, in even one town or region or country, would be difficult, dangerous, and would take a long time. But the truth of what God wants for humanity ... the way in which God created us to live with, and among, each other ... compelled Jesus to speak this truth, to describe the vision, and to give people hope and encouragement as they heard these new truths. Jesus described a way of living in peace: with compassion, not violence; generosity, not greed; reverence for God, not for political or religious leaders.

As impossible as this ideal seems – and it must have seemed even more impossible 2,000 years ago – Jesus had no choice but to voice it, describe it, define it, and gift it to us. It was the world as he knew God intended it to be: not perfect, but not rife with poverty, warfare, greed, tyranny, cruelty, lies, bigotry, and fear. Impossible as such a world still seems, political analyst Tod Lindberg points out that, in many ways, the world has, indeed, changed for the better because of Jesus's teachings: "... the politics of the modern world is substantially Jesusian (related to the teachings of Jesus) in character ... Jesus introduced the ideal of universal freedom (and) today there are more people in the world who are free than there were in Jesus's time ... people today mostly believe that all people should be free ... Dead set against politics based on the rule of the strong, or of an elite, or of the mob, Jesus proposed instead a political order organized on the principle of shared recognition of freedom and equality ... a community of goodwill ... The most difficult political challenges of our day, though much diminished in scope by the spread of Jesusian teaching, remain the same as those Jesus set out to relieve two thousand years ago."⁵ It is the "difficult political challenges of our day" to which we must still apply Jesus's wisdom and guidance.

⁵ Lindberg *The Political Teachings of Jesus* pp 2-3

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, it is part of the flow of teachings that include the Beatitudes, parables, and Jesus's instructions for right living. In Luke, it is offered as a response to a disciple's request: "Teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." There is no record of what John taught his disciples, but in the case of Jesus, as well as John, we can assume that their respective disciples weren't asking *how* to pray as much as they were asking 'For what should we pray?' These people were Jews. They had been taught to pray from childhood on. For decades, they heard temple calls to prayer and had surely offered countless prayers to God. But in this new world of Jesus's teachings, where 'the last shall be first and the first shall be last', it was natural to ask the Teacher for guidance in knowing what matters, what to bring before God in prayer. Jesus's answer is simple, but it is layered with important meaning, nuance, and emphasis. Whether he intended it or not, in its very structure Jesus's prayer reflects his whole-world/all-people view. The prayer has Jewish literary parallels, but no Jewish-specific pronouncements. "... the prayer he taught his disciples is a purposefully universal prayer,"⁶ not limited in use or reference to any one group or population. In that regard, it lifts our minds above parochialism or sectarianism or any toxic attitude of owning God, of having sole claim to a connection or favor with the Creator. This universal stance is reflected in the first words of Jesus's prayer.

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be Your name. "Our Father." The God of each of us, all of us. In these words, Jesus's arms were opened out widely, symbolically, to embrace the whole world. God is the God of all of us. "Hallowed be Your name." We say these words easily, naturally. But in Jesus's time, these words were a defiant slap in the face of Caesar. "Roman state religion required that Caesar's name alone be hallowed (revered, made sacred). One of Caesar's Greek titles was *Soter* (Savior)."⁷ As devout Jews, Jesus and his disciples knew that God is holy. It's likely that Jesus, in these first words of his prayer, was speaking not of affirming God's divinity, but of inviting it, of asking God to show his holiness, to be actively present in this prayerful moment of connection and communion with him. Jesus was, deliberately and defiantly, hallowing God, not Caesar.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done. Again, *malkuth shamayim*: the sole sovereignty of God, and once again, a dangerous, defiant challenge to Caesar. Jesus was not only inviting God's kingdom to come, he was implying that Caesar's kingdom would end ... must end. It was also a challenge to the high priests who, for so many years, and in so many ways, had put themselves in God's place. God's kingdom come, not Caesar's. God's will be done, not the will of the Pharisees and Sadducees. "... one of the reasons Jesus publicly rejected the legitimacy of the Temple priesthood was because, rather than working to establish God's kingdom of liberation and wholeness, in too many ways the

⁶ Hendricks, Obery *The Politics of Jesus* p. 105

⁷ Hendricks *The Politics of Jesus* p. 104

priests were aligned with the interests of their Roman overlord, offering sacrifices on Caesar's behalf, even uttering 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19:15) when their loyalty was questioned."⁸

On earth as it is in Heaven. "As it is in heaven", not as it is in the brutal, often lawless and inhumane world in which so many people lived in the first century ... and ever since. The world Jesus saw so clearly – in his mind, heart, and soul – is the world as God intended it to be: a world of joy and contentment, of sufficiency and sharing, of more peace than conflict. Life on earth cannot duplicate the perfection of heaven. Jesus knew that, and so do we. But life here was intended, by its Creator, to be a life in which human beings dwell together and interact with relative peace, where we are equal under God's law and equally protected under our laws, and where we can live in a mutually beneficial and sustaining relationship with our environment as well as with each other.

All of this may seem like a fantasy, a pipe dream. We look at our world and see bombs dropped on hospitals, other bombs dropped on schools. Teenagers with assault rifles shoot classmates, and a woman is jailed and killed because she wore her head scarf, required by her religion, too loosely. Some nations throw away millions of pounds of food each year, while in other nations, infants with twig-thin arms and bloated bellies wail in hunger. We see all of this and can't imagine being able to change it. It's too big, too overwhelming. But think about it. Jesus was not a liar or a charlatan, and he wasn't playing games or tricks when he gave us his teachings. He would not have said "on earth as it is in Heaven" – he would not have told us to pray those words to God – if they had no meaning and no possibility of fulfillment. The wisdom of Jesus and the will and timing of God are surely, in their totality, beyond our comprehension, but not beyond the mustard seed of faith they ask of us. If we hear what Jesus says, if we absorb in mind and heart what he teaches, and if we step out with even that seed-sized kernel of faith, to shape a world as God would have it, who knows what divine and human forces might be set into motion? Next, the rest of the Lord's Prayer.

"Forgive" or "Release", "Trespases" or "Debts"

Give us this day our daily bread. For the poor of Jesus's time ... as for many in our world ... having something to eat is a daily concern. This can be difficult to understand for those who have full refrigerators and well-stocked freezers and pantries. Bread was a staple in first-century Israel, and Jesus understood that it had an importance beyond simply alleviating hunger. He knew that if people had no food for themselves or their families, little else would get their attention. They would, understandably, be solely focused on the critical need for food. There would be no chance for people to think about, much less aspire to and work for, the better life toward which Jesus was calling them. Hunger, in many ways, steals not only strength, but spirit. Once again, Jesus tells us to

⁸ Hendricks *The Politics of Jesus* p. 107

pray for ‘our’ daily bread, not ‘my’ daily bread. He lifts our sights from our own needs, even our own crises, to a recognition that our fellow human beings also have needs, and that we should have empathy for their needs as well as for ours.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Some languages have two forms: a formal, ‘high’ form of the language, and a common, less refined, ‘low’ form. The Aramaic language of Jesus’s time seems to have had this characteristic, and Jesus apparently knew both forms. It is interesting that he used the more common form of the language when he spoke the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Perhaps he did so because it would be understood by more of his listeners. But an additional, subtle difference comes into play. The Aramaic word *shavaq* or *shbaq* could mean ‘forgive’ or ‘release’. But in the common form of Aramaic, which Jesus used in his prayer, *shbaq* almost always meant ‘release’. The word *hobha* could mean ‘sin’ or ‘debt’, but in common Aramaic it almost always meant ‘debt’. If he did use these words, perhaps Jesus’s choice of words was deliberate. In the context of his world, in the lives of the majority of people to whom Jesus was speaking, ‘release’ and ‘debt’ were powerful words, with serious meaning.

We almost can’t imagine the burden of indebtedness that weighed down upon the common people of Jesus’s time. Taxes, tithes, and tributes reduced most people to subsistence living. In extreme cases, older children were sold into servitude, slavery, or forced marriage to provide the family with some money to support remaining family members a while longer. The poor borrowed from the wealthy to pay their taxes, usually at high interest rates. (It is interesting to think of how often, in both the Hebrew Scriptures [Old Testament] and the New Testament, charging high interest and forcing people into debt is condemned.) After years of borrowing and still having unpayable debt, the poor were often imprisoned or sold into slavery. Matthew 18:25-35 gives us a glimpse of this wretched debt system: “But as he was not able to pay, his master (lender) commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.” I used to think that, when Jesus saw the poor widow put her last two mites (coins) into the (Temple) treasury, he was commending her generosity. Now I hear his words differently: “This poor widow ... out of her poverty put in all the livelihood she had” (Luke 21:3-4). She had nothing left on which to live. Perhaps Jesus was not admiring her charity as much as he was grieving her utter poverty and spotlighting the injustice of further impoverishing the poor through taxes, tithes, and tributes.

One of the behaviors of some high priests that most angered Jesus was the practice of becoming lenders, enriching themselves by charging interest to the same poor peasants who had to borrow to pay the tithes and tributes to the priests in the first place. When the poor defaulted on their debts, the priest-lenders seized their debtors’ farms, property, and homesteads, “totally dispossessing those whom they were called to serve ... The only logical reason to lend was ... the hope of winning the peasants’ land by foreclosing on it when the debt was not paid off as agreed.”⁹ In our praying, we may choose to say

⁹ Goodman, Martin *The Ruling Class of Judea* p. 56

“forgive us our sins”, or “forgive us our trespasses”. Those choices are valid and may be right and appropriate for us. As with most parts of the Bible, these verses – these word meanings and options – are open to interpretation and debate. A teacher of the Hebrew language told me that he and others could debate one word for hours without agreeing on its meaning. As I look at Jesus and at the people he loved and wanted to lift up, his choice seems deliberate. I believe he was asking God to ‘release us from our debts, as we release our debtors’ because those words applied powerfully to the debt-burdened, oppressed people of his day.

Lead us not into temptation (or time of trial). God would not lead us astray, would not lead us into temptation. This petition is more accurately understood to mean ‘help us to resist temptation, give us the strength to do so’. Again, in the relative comfort and safety in which most of us live, it might be difficult to understand how weak and vulnerable people might be when they are beaten down by fear, brutality, or deprivation. Had I lived in Jesus’s time, I might have become a prostitute to feed my family, I might have been a thief. I might have had no strength, no will, to stand up for myself, or to resist the abuses of those with power. I might well have been tempted to give in or give up. Sometimes, you just can’t fight anymore. Jesus gave people words with which to beseech their God for strength to believe, to hold on, to know that there is a better way— God’s way.

Deliver us from evil. This we understand. We’re human. We can’t avoid, or protect ourselves from, all the harmful and evil things that might befall us. We have this in common with the people of Jesus’s time and all times. Common sense tells us each of us will have times of difficulty, loss, heartbreak, and pain. Such things are part of life. But this petition implores God’s protection and rescue from something more, something Jesus called “evil”, which we can’t – perhaps don’t want to – imagine. Surely, evil is something that requires God’s assistance for our battles with it, and our deliverance from it. Perhaps, if he were walking among us today, Jesus would amend this petition a bit. Perhaps he would say “Deliver us from evil ... and help us to not link ourselves to evil.” Or perhaps his words include that thought as well. In any case, “Father, deliver us from evil.”

For Yours is the kingdom. Again, *malkuth shamayim*, the sole sovereignty of God. In Jesus’s time, those competing with God – for attention, allegiance, and veneration – were few in number: priestly elites and secular rulers. Today, celebrities and elected officials, cult figures and internet influencers, political candidates and billionaire business leaders, even self-serving religious leaders, all want a piece of us, and they want to be, god-like, at the center of the world. Millions of people can’t go a day without posting opinions or photos on social media. The famous, and would-be famous, gravitate toward spotlights, microphones, and cameras as if they were magnetized. At some level of vibration, beyond our hearing, there is an endless chorus of “Me! Me! Me!” in the world. But in the stillness, Jesus says, “... **Yours (God’s) is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.**” God’s. Only God’s. Forever and forever. Amen.

Our World ... and Jesus

If Jesus would come to us now ... would be physically present with us as we look at our 'polities' and at our world ... he would not tell us how to vote, he would tell us how to think. As Lindberg notes, "Jesus was not a progressive Democrat or a neo-conservative Republican,"¹⁰ although both parties often claim sole connection to him. Jesus would speak to us as he spoke to people 2,000 years ago. He would raise our sights to higher levels of thinking and more humane ways of living. He would tell us to use our God-given common sense and wisdom ... and our innate sensibilities ... in our political thinking and discourse, as well as in our everyday work and family life. We should not leave our sense of morality – our discernment of right and wrong – in church after worship, and then go on to amoral or unwise living in the home, workplace, or world. As he did with those near the mountainside, Jesus points us to a wisdom and humaneness that should infuse all of our life, actions, and thinking, including our political views and ideas. ***Jesus's concept of the relationship between politics and religion has two aspects. First, that our own intelligence, compassion, and regard for others should guide our political thinking and choices; second, that we should evaluate political figures, policies, and proposals according to God's standards for truthfulness, peace, equality, and justice.***

In our world today, there are nations dominated by a single religion, and nations flirting with the idea of having a state religion. In the U.S., 'Christian Nationalism' has become a common reference, although it seems to be a contradiction in terms, such an entity unable to be either Christian or nationalistic. Jesus, in his teachings and in his life, did not model any amalgam of church and government. He could have easily done so. In the wilderness, Satan offered Jesus limitless earthly power (Matt. 4:8-9). When he was arrested, he knew he could save himself and defeat all who opposed him: "Do you think I cannot call to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53) But it was not Jesus's calling or intent to be an earthly ruler. His focus was on transforming minds and hearts so that, with new understanding and God-given perspective, people might reflect God's love and will in all the places and pursuits of their lives, including their civic lives. As the centuries have shown, the jointure of church and state has almost always been toxic, destructive, and ultimately harmful to both. While popes and monarchs often colluded for their own benefit and purposes, periods such as the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition stand as monuments to the folly of the mix of state and church. America's founders, in their wisdom, based on their own experience and knowledge of history, made sure there would be no national religion in America. America would have religious freedom and freedom from religious control.

In the U.S., the prospect of a national religion, if it were not alarming, is almost amusing. The question arises immediately: whose religion? Christianity alone would never suffice for zealots. They would demand a specific form of Christianity. Can we picture this nation's 52+ million adult Catholics, the majority Roman Catholic, squaring off for primacy against a similar number of Baptists, most of them Southern Baptists,

¹⁰ Lindberg *The Political Teachings of Jesus* Preface

but also the American Baptist Church, Historically Black Baptist Church, and Non-denominational Baptists? Can we imagine Baptists being told to obey the Pope, observe saints' days, and use the rosary? Baptists have historically opposed the union of state and church. Can we picture them ordering Catholics to throw away their rosaries? While this conflict unfolds, other denominations might be occupied with their own focuses and differences. Perhaps Moravians would be recording the skirmish for the archives, while our 'Friends', the Quakers, would be praying for all of us. Jewish citizens would be combatting waves of anti-Semitism, while America's Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Mormons, and others would have to fend for themselves. Perhaps the roughly one-third of our citizens who claim no religion could migrate elsewhere. Jesus was wise in knowing that it is our humane, value-centered lives and beliefs that we bring to the affairs of state, not our religions themselves. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. may have said it best: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather its conscience."¹¹

If Jesus did speak to us about matters of governance, he would surely tell us that our civic life – like family, work, and community life – must be grounded in truth and honesty; must be beneficial to all, not favorable for a few, and not at the expense of others, especially not at the expense of the powerless and most vulnerable. In choosing political leaders and pathways, he would tell us to use our wisdom and God-guided values. The words from the Beatitudes, parables, and Lord's Prayer are as applicable to our civic life as to our personal life. Jesus would guide us to look for leaders who have an unwavering commitment to truth— seeing it, speaking it, living it. He would advise us to look for leaders with conscience, with integrity and honesty, with the attitude of a servant-leader, emphasis on 'servant'. Worthy leaders have the strength of character to serve the people, not party bosses, billionaire supporters, or any others to whom they'd owe favors. Worthy leaders have humility— the recognition that we are all equal, from heads of state to the homeless; equally sacred, equally flawed, equally beloved before God. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Matt. 23:12)

I can almost hear the question: "Where are we to find such paragons of virtue?" Perhaps we begin by rejecting those who *don't* meet standards of wisdom, decency, and servanthood, regardless of political party or positions of power. There is an old truism: 'When someone shows you who they are, believe them.' Many candidates and elected officials show us exactly who they are. Some know less about U.S. history than a seventh grader does. Some flaunt greed and special interests without shame. Some – even in speeches and authorized biographies – brag about shady business practices, fraudulent dealings, and unethical behavior. And some, as we learned 50 years ago, in the Watergate era, even plot thievery and violence. American writer Marya Mannes said, "No man is a Christian who cheats his fellows, perverts the truth, or speaks of a 'clean bomb', and yet he will be the first to proclaim his faith in God."¹² The presence of such people in public life also takes another regrettable, and largely invisible, toll: the scum at the top of the

¹¹ King, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther Jr., *Strength to Love* 1963

¹² Mannes, Marya *More in Anger* 1958

political pond prevents others from wanting to dive into those fetid waters. All over America, we lose the wisdom and services of fine men and women – who could serve their towns, states, and nation admirably – because they don't want to expose themselves or their families to the disgusting debacle which the political process has become.

In this huge and great country, there is likely no problem, no challenge – healthcare, public education, immigration, energy, economy, infrastructure – that couldn't be solved or made better if people of intelligence, expertise, and good will addressed it in the absence of political influence or interference. Instead, some members of Congress make it clear their number one goal is not to serve their constituents but to make sure that no piece of legislation proposed by the other party is ever passed. Both major parties share in the shame of this behavior and partisanship. Why have we tolerated such behavior? Perhaps the muddiness around truth itself has something to do with it. Were he with us in the flesh today, even Jesus might be stunned by the breadth, depth, and number of lies that surround us. Lies – even whoppers – have probably been with us since humans lived in caves. In Genesis, Potiphar's wife, who didn't succeed in seducing Joseph, falsely accuses him of raping her, and Joseph is imprisoned. In the days of the French Revolution (1789-99), pamphleteers wrote increasingly outrageous lies – claiming everything from bathing in blood to sickening sexual deviance – about Marie Antoinette, who was already disliked by the populace. She was beheaded. In 1938, in *The Nation*, Joseph Goebbels said "Jesus could not possibly have been a Jew. I don't have to prove that scientifically, it's a fact." For Goebbels, Hitler's Reich Minister for Propaganda, it was problematic to be planning the gassing and incinerating of millions of Jews while Germany was filled with churches venerating Jesus. So, he simply ignored Jesus's Jewish ancestry and declared him to be a non-Jew. When the truth is inconvenient, deny it and pervert it.

In May of 1972, President Nixon appeared on television to announce the mining of Haiphong Harbor in Viet Nam. He made a later TV appearance, holding up scores of telegrams from Americans who supported his decision. Two years later, when the Water-gate deceit was revealed, a White House staff member admitted "We spent \$8,400 on fake telegrams and ads to stir up phony support for the President's decision. Money was used to pay for telegrams to the White House, to tell the President what a great move it was, so that (Press Secretary Ron) Ziegler could announce that telegram support ... was running some large percentage in support of the President. Money also went to pay for a phony ad in the New York Times, signed by ten supposedly independent people willing to fork over several thousand dollars of their own money to express their opinion ... (but) the ad was paid for with forty of those \$100 bills from (Campaign Finance Chair Maurice) Stans's safe."¹³ The avalanche of denialism – 9/11 never happened, Sandy Hook never happened, no kids were killed in the Parkland shooting, Princess Diana faked her death, and so did JFK. Jr., so that they could be married – is another aspect of the deceptions in which we seem to be drowning. Alternative news, alternative facts, alternative realities ... while Jesus says, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

¹³ Woodward, Bob and Bernstein, Carl *All the President's Men* pp 265-266

All of this brings us back to the hillside where Jesus preached to the people of his time. Imagine you are standing there with him. Look at the people gathered. You don't see rulers or the religious and secular power-players of the day. You're looking at the common people, some people of wealth, and the poor, the helpless, the hopeless, the least powerful people in the region. It was they to whom Jesus was speaking, encouraging and empowering them. Why? Perhaps because he understood – as we do not yet understand – the power of the individual. Words written by American poet Carl Sandberg gave rise to the question “What if they gave a war and nobody came?” What if one person, then another, reached for truth, for God-given wisdom, for love, for the highest and best in us and for us, to which Jesus calls us ... calls us in all areas of life, including political life? What if we applied Jesus's words, teachings, and standards to our shared life, to the large and small communities that comprise the ‘polities’ in which we live?

This meditative focus is intended to remind us of how broad, deep, and divisive our problems have become, and how necessary it is to confront them. If he were with us, speaking to us, Jesus would surely tell us to talk to each other, to reach across the divides. It might be difficult, and we don't have to engage with those who don't want to listen and only want to hate, disrupt, and destroy. But if even some of us can begin to speak to each other, we might make some progress ... at least some. Let's remember that Jesus's kindness was not limited to his own people or to those he liked or with whom he agreed. He ministered to and healed a Roman centurion's servant; the Samaritan woman at the well; a servant of the high priest; the daughter of a Gentile woman; the Gadarene man with demons; a Samaritan leper; the daughter of Jairus, the ruler of a synagogue in Capernaum; and the multitudes – the sick, deformed, and deranged – who came to him from great distances and were surely not all of his faith or tribe. Jesus calls us to this same kind of openness, and Jesus would smile as we respond ... as he directs our gaze back to the cross.

Back to the Cross

We return to the place where we began: the foot of the cross. Many of us are inclined to turn away from the terrible sight of Jesus on the cross. We also, consciously or not, often turn away from the reality of his life and teachings, especially when we find them inconvenient or contrary to our biases and pre-conceived notions. Many people prefer the meek and mild Jesus, a milquetoast figure in robe and sandals, rather than the strong, defiant man who confronted the Pharisees, the soldiers, and the power of Rome itself. We prefer the Easter Jesus – the shining, cleaned-up, resurrected Christ – to the bloodied Jesus who hung on the cross. It's hard, it's wrenching, to look at the man nailed to the wood. It sickens us to see the blood, the sweat, the tears pouring down in the mid-day sun. Instinctively, we turn away. But it is this Jesus at whom we must look, who we must see clearly, with no illusions and no erasing of the truth, if we want to truly understand his message, understand why he would knowingly die such a death, for us and for the message he conveyed from God. The nails were not hammered into his hands because he had a philosophical disagreement with the Pharisees. His feet were not spiked to the

cross because he healed people. The braided thorns were not rammed down onto his head because he taught using parables. Jesus was on that cross – he lived and he died – because he saw the totality of life, all of life, including political and civic life, as being in God’s sphere, love, and will.

In all areas of life, Jesus called for peace, freedom, truth, justice, compassion; for an end to greed, brutality, violence, and oppression. He dared to say that we are all equal; that earthly power should be used for good; that rulers must be servants, not ego-centered, power-hungry despots. Jesus writhed in pain on that cross because he said there is a kingdom greater than Rome; because he called for God’s will, not Caesar’s, to be “done on earth as it is in heaven”. The sign Pilate ordered to be placed above Jesus’s head – “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”, a sign intended to mock him – said it all: this is the Jesus who rejected earthly power and kingship although he could have had both from the wilderness on. This is the Jesus who knew that our transformed and God-centered lives must be lived in all aspects of life, including civic and political realms, where we deserve and should demand the best and the highest, not tolerate the basest and lowest. Jesus dared to defy the tempter in the wilderness. He dared to throw the money changers from the temple. He dared to challenge the high priests and the Pharisees. He dared ... politically, personally ... to defy Caesar and Herod and the forces of Rome itself. Jesus called us to love each other, to pursue peace, justice, sufficiency for all and subjugation for none, so that God’s purpose for our life on earth might be fulfilled. In his last breaths, Jesus still loved, and he still lived what he taught: “Father, forgive them” Jesus dared to bring his message ... to live his teachings ... despite the dangers that finally claimed his life. If you don’t want to hear these words and commands of Jesus, if you don’t want to look at the reality of what he said and what he sacrificed, if you “don’t want any mixing of politics and religion”, don’t tell your pastor or your friends. Don’t tell me. Look at the man on the cross. Tell him. I dare you.

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-Carol Dean Henn