

Jesus Country

Welcome to our summer series 'Good News for Bad Times.' I'm excited. And nervous. We're going to engage the gospel in real time, using secular tools and language. Rather than contemplating spiritual history we are going to dive in, do a biblical time warp. Strap in. Time for take off.

For so long, some of us who walk behind the cross have been told that 'church is not political.' And yet, that walk behind the cross didn't happen through a church. It happened through city streets, under the direction and armed eye of government soldiers. So did everything that led to it. The gospel is misused every day, cherry-picked to justify restriction, condemnation, judgement and supremacy. Any time anyone questions such misuse, the response is that 'church is not political.' Clearly, those who are misusing the gospel are not hesitating to vocalize their thoughts on what it means to be Christian beyond the church. So I say again: church IS political. It just isn't partisan, and certainly not controlled by our short sighted two party politics.

Unfortunately, what is being said in the name of Christ isn't always Christian. And it is going unanswered, which is...well, bad news.

If we are going to say that Jesus was and is political, then what does it mean to be a patriot? How, when, and for what reasons does our faith call us to respond? What does it look like for a Christian to lay down their life for a friend, then? What does it mean, to commemorate our national independence as Christians?

I've spent the week pouring through Dietrich Boenhoffer's writings to make sense of these questions. Boenhoffer, was a prominent pacifist German pastor as Hitler was in ascendance there. He continually spoke out against the

regime, but took no action. For 6 years, through increasing restriction, fear, and rising nationalist fervor, Bonhoeffer stated his alarm. Finally, 6 years in, he joined the resistance. By then, in 1939, there were 21,000 residents of the camps. Over the next 4 years, as Bonhoeffers limited efforts continued, the number rose to 525,000. Bonhoeffer, while increasingly troubled, took no direct action, and there is no clear sense of what role he played in at least one assassination plot against Hitler. Historians agree it was not direct. He was martyred all the same, leaving us with some of the most eloquent warnings against fascism we could have, and a painfully honest struggle with what his faith called upon him to do.

Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. ... The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other. The process at work here is not that particular human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. **Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances.** The fact that the stupid person is often stubborn must not blind us to the fact that he is not independent. **In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being.** Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. This is where the danger of diabolical misuse lurks, for it is this that can once and for all destroy human beings."

When we experience a 4th of July celebration that takes place with children in cages, encouraged by our government to drink from the toilet because 'it is probably an improvement' for them, I believe our faith says we must contemplate the destruction of our humanity.

We may say that we didn't vote for this administration. We may say that we speak out against it. And yet, that which we give unto Caesar, our taxes, are being used to achieve these atrocities. Many of us held our hands over our hearts and said the pledge this week: allegiance not to Christ, but to the flag of these (united???) states. Allegiance to the republic that has opened concentration camps, deported war heroes who fought for the freedom we say we stand for, and is increasingly deporting the families of those heroes. We claim this nation to be under God. To support liberty and justice for all.

I believe that Jesus would feel pretty good about the words of the pledge. I feel even more strongly that he would condemn the ways by which we have gone about it. Certainly the ways we are going about it today.

How did we get here?

As Stephen Mattson puts it in the May issue of *Sojourners*, "Christian America was established by those who are almost exclusively white, male, and Christian. It was simultaneously used as a tool to eliminate and subjugate people of color... hate and racism were so embedded within this religion that the KKK was marketed as a Christian institution... it is still so prevalent within white Christianity today that many still refuse to acknowledge systemic racism as a problem... this false and idolatrous narrative of American Christianity is still prevalent."

And this is how Christianity becomes a tool of nationalists looking to maintain their control rather than a conversation partner for a nation seeking to be its best self. It is, bluntly put, idolatry. See, as Andrew Spencer puts it in *Ethics and Culture*, "For nationalism the primary goal is the good of the nation; For a healthy patriotism, the primary goal is the good, with the expectation that one's nation will pursue that both internally and externally."

I think a great case can be made that Jesus was a patriot. He sought to make everyday life better for his people by opposing a repressive regime. He didn't seek to make the Temple better, he sought to make the world better, and the Temple with it. If the polis is the place of the people, and liturgy is the work of the people, then we, God's people, have responsibilities to our community. Jesus tells us so. We still have to answer what those responsibilities are.

If we believe that Jesus is the bringer of food for the hungry, hope for the hopeless, new life for those abandoned – if we believe that, we must act accordingly and demand, not ask, but demand a government that acts accordingly. Jesus never said 'worship me.' We do not need a Christian nation to live as true Christians within our nation. Or to stand up for, even fight for our nation.

Nationalism has become the single loud narrative of what it means to be a Christian in America. It is idolatrous. You need not feel bad or guilty about calling out idolatry. It is your Christian duty, in fact. And this is the Good News!

People are hurting because of this false idol. People are suffering under the weight of it, and we are not seen as Christians but as supporters of this false God. Standing up for Jesus, telling everyone you meet how different the Christ you follow is, giving loud and proud permission for others to set aside a Nationalist idol in favor of a loving and liberating God is what it means in these dark times to share the Good News of Christ.

We need to teach each other to hear the difference between Christ and idols. We need to talk through together the lines between patriotism and nationalism. We need to speak and act prophetically when we are witness to or participating in the wrong side of these coins, dipped as they are in Caesar's gold.

I cannot tell you what actions that search for Christ will mean for you. I am constantly discerning for myself. What we can offer one another is partners for the journey. And we can invite others who are lost in the wilderness of the questions to wrestle with them with us. The times are, indeed urgent for this Good News.

Bonhoeffer said “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

Let us learn, not only from the wise words of Saint Bonhoeffer, but also from his tragic and misguided delay. For, beloved, the kin-dom of God is always, and coming. And that is indeed, Good News for Bad times.