

Text: *Luke: 24:31* Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

### **The Case of the Vanished God**

Spoiler alert! Jesus came back! I hope that did not come as a surprise to you. This meditation deals with three gods, that when recognized and identified as to what they really are, do, indeed, vanish. They are such powerful gods that they often elicit religious fervor among their believers. Death, unrelenting privation and social unrest are their constant companions. The common thread that binds these gods together is the absence of Jesus.

Nationalism: The god that gets the most press, and probably causes the most mischief, is nationalism. Jesus did not oppose nationalism, as long as it did not interfere with his ministry of healing and the empowerment of common people. He famously said, "my kingdom is not of this world and render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's." But Jesus ignored religious rules and leaders when they interfered with helping people and in the Beatitudes, he certainly empowered the people at the very bottom of the social and political hierarchy. He was universalistic, he did not see the working of the spirit limited by national boundaries. Certainly, the notion that one nation, above others, has the special favor of God would be foreign to his teachings. The political – religious doctrine of exceptionalism is not found in Jesus's views as presented in the Gospels. The doctrine is dangerous because it seems to give God's consent to nationalist atrocities from the crusades to the genocide of the European Jews to any number of current nationalist power preoccupations.

It is good to be proud of your country and even better to show that pride by working to make one's country even better through correcting its shortcomings. The god of nationalism should vanish. I don't know what would replace it, hopefully something that would make Jesus smile as he changed water into wine to celebrate human freedom of choice.

If the world was divided into those who worship the hatchet, the worshipers of the clever and the believers in the sacredness of the axe, one would hope that most people would say that they are confusing tools with gods. That is true even though they are all useful and are all capable of murder. Morality is not inherent in a tool, but in the person who wields it. So, it is with the tools of economic organization. Mercantilism, capitalism, socialism, communism or even Jesus's communalism, should not be elevated into sacred status. The isms are tools, not gods. There is no evil or good that is intrinsic to the method of organization. I don't entirely agree with the old English saying, "of forms of government let fools contest, that which is administered best is best." Even Jesus had some trouble with his treasurer! One might reasonably say that the choice of tools should be pragmatic. Use what works but leave attributes of god out of it.

The gods just mentioned are about institutional arrangements. Here are some gods that are more personal; not that any of us would be bothered by them! All of these gods start out as benign behaviors, but they become god and separate us from Jesus when the behavior becomes obsessive.

The first of these behaviors is self-worth. We all need a sense of personal worth. This is especially an issue for Christian women in our society since the male dominated tribalism of the Old Testament frequently is used to establish male superiority in church, in the home and in the larger society. This is not a Jesus teaching. Self-worth issues are common among young people and not

unknown among all adults. It is when concern about self becomes overwhelmingly obsessive that we find it driving a wedge between Jesus and ourselves. That set of behaviors is called narcissism. When we suffer from this disease, we believe that we are our own god. The behaviors we exhibit tend to be disruptive and dysfunctional. It is a god that needs to be examined and revealed for what it is and then it needs to vanish from our lives. Jesus will welcome us back to humanity.

Being a productive person is something that most of us desire. Whatever our age or station in life we enjoy the feeling of contributing to the larger whole for the benefit of ourselves, our families and our larger identity. When we become fixated on the fruits of productivity, and we obsess over our success, we then fall victim to greed. Work and money and possessions for their own sake, all interpose themselves between Jesus and ourselves. Greed is a mighty god.

Finally, we come to action. We like to see things get done. And we like to contribute towards getting them done. But if this behavior becomes obsessive it then is transformed into a lust for power and control. It is a lust that damages all that it contacts, whether institutions or individuals. One of our recent historians updated Lord Acton's law that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely; by adding and before it corrupts absolutely it drives one insane.

Personal gods that separate us from Jesus: Narcissism, greed and power; the three horses of our spiritual and psychological apostasy.

There are plenty of false gods – gods that vanish when we get to know their true nature. Nationalism, ideology, personal obsessions, all distance us from the saving love of Jesus. Act locally, love globally. That is the true message of Jesus.

My most cherished critic read this meditation and said that it was not very uplifting for an Easter message. As usual, she is right. But sometimes one needs to be up-standing, before you can be up-lifted. The resurrection of Jesus was not a one-off magical trick by God. Jesus is resurrected daily by all of us, in all of us. It is our decision whether we keep Jesus locked away in our personal spiritual sepulcher or do we roll the stone away and allow him to work in our lives. Every morning is resurrection morning.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.