

**Sunday 19 September 2021**  
**Glynde Lutheran Church**  
**Sermon on Revelation Mark 9:30 – 37**  
**Theme: “Religionless Christianity”**

*By Pastor Mike Pietsch*

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Is Christianity a religion? Do you see Christianity as a religion or a relationship? A religion usually has a concept of a deity as well as an ethical system along with a hierarchy of values and people. It also has a variety of rituals and liturgies that the people in that religion follow. These may include special calendars and events when various aspects of that religion are celebrated along with social expectations and customs and traditions. In many of these ways, at least from the outside, Christianity fits the bill of being a religion.

But unfortunately, many people, both inside the church and outside of it, see Christianity primarily as a religion and then miss out on what it is really all about. In the same way as Jesus addressed his Jewish community and the faith of the Old Testament with many criticisms and disarming facts, he also comes to the Christian faith and pulls it to pieces, as well as our misunderstandings of who he is and what is our relationship to him. Jesus warns us that life is not about religion and fulfilling its requirements so that we can be closer to God or that we can use God as a security blanket whom we can hang on to. As far as God is concerned, our relationship with Jesus is not just one part of our life but involves every moment and every second and every move that we make. That is how God sees it. From the outside this may initially sound stifling and controlling. But when we live with the God who liberates us from ourselves, it is the most beautiful and wonderful existence that we could ever imagine.

Today I want us to explore how to get rid of the 'religious' part of our Christian faith. The religious part often involves a focus on what WE are doing or have done or promise that we will do for God. It is a focus on checking to see if WE have adequately fulfilled all the requirements of God and the church so that we are "OK". It often involves feeling guilty as well as comparing ourselves with other people. It looks at the ladder of success in life or in the church. It assesses how far up we have climbed and how we compare with other people our own age or in our social group or between siblings or peers at work or in the community. We all know that there is a certain pecking order where we include ourselves, seeing some people below us and some above us.

By contrast Jesus comes and smashes down all of that religious structure. He smashes the divisions and judgements that we make of ourselves and others. He questions the rules and the critical attitudes that we have towards each other. He does this today in our Gospel lesson in which the disciples are disputing among each other as to who is higher or lower on the pecking order. He says to them that in fact the Kingdom of God is in the reverse direction. The greatest is the most humanly unworthy, the gross sinners, the marginalised, the poor and downtrodden, the ones who not only would we scarcely look at, but whom we would far more prefer to avoid. These are the uncouth, the 'rough as bags', the smelly and the social outcasts. Jesus uses the insignificance of a child, who in those days was usually kept "out of sight and out of mind", a bit along the lines of "seen and not heard". A child has little way of bringing anything to offer in terms of wealth or experience or wisdom or connections. But Jesus wraps his arms around this child and says that he loves her unconditionally.

This new way of living in relationship with Jesus is one in which we are no longer in control nor have any bargaining chips in our relationship with God. We have given up those tightly held bits of pride and power,

piousness and promises. Jesus' Kingdom is one of vulnerability and uncertainty. We stand before Jesus on his cross and can only say with the hymn writer: "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to your cross I cling, naked come to you for dress, helpless look to you for grace, foul I to the fountain fly, wash me saviour e'er I die." Jesus neither needs or wants anything in between himself and us. He wants and loves the raw person that we are, warts and all. There is no pretence or front with Jesus. We can only stand before him in our utter brokenness and honesty as people who are hungry, weak and limited. Jesus comes to give us all that we will ever need in this life and the next. He comes to give us total and unconditional love, no matter what we have done or what sort of life we have led. He comes to wash our feet and step into our shoes, and even wear those shoes all the way to hell for us. He does not do this in a condescending way but in a way that loves and liberates us to be his sisters and brothers who can also call God 'Abba Father'. He comes to say that we can also call his "dad" our "dad".

This is the topsy-turvy world of religionless Christianity. It is strange, weird and wonderful, all at the same time. How can God be the one on the cross dying in weakness and powerlessness? We then hear his call to powerlessness and weakness, to live in his brokenness which is our brokenness. And as we start to really live close to the intimate God who comes so close to us, we are drawn close to each other. It is then that we realise and discover that every other person is hanging on the cross with us in our saviour Jesus. We cannot exclude anybody from that all-embracing love of Jesus, no matter whom they are, including our worst enemies and the people that we cannot stand. We recognise that we all share the same humanity which is the same humanity that Jesus shares with every human being. So we are given a new vision of each person that we live with, each person who crosses our path, each person who enters into our church or whom we invite to our faith community here. All structure and judging are absorbed by Jesus to bring about unity and

love between every human being. That is the Good News. That is the basis for every decision we make, it is the way in which we look at every person in our community and our everyday lives.

Welcome to the topsy turvy religionless world of Jesus Christ. This is why the early Christians were accused of “turning the world upside down” in Acts 17:6. These are the radicals who are messing up our neat and orderly religious system in which we have a place for everything. Coming from a German background this can be quite disorientating. But Jesus is coming to us and saying, when your system and order and religious rules get in between me and you and between me and other people, then you know which has to go. My loving relationship with people is what comes at the highest priority. Blow all the laws and religious guidelines, good as some of them might be at certain times. But if they get between me and you or between you and other people then they are to be relegated to the bottom of the heap.

This is secret and scary stuff. This is why Jesus was taking his disciples aside to try and explain it to them before it all exploded in the death of Jesus, the death of the Messiah, the death of God. The disciples were just not getting it, which is shown when Jesus catches them out talking about aggrandisizing themselves rather than following the humble path in the footsteps of the servant-King Jesus.