

## The Last Temptation

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 22:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 125; James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-17; *Mark 8:27-38*.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

There's been a lot of controversy in the past weeks about a newly released film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The film isn't based on the Gospel records of the life of Jesus but on a book written nearly 40 years ago by Nikos Kazantsakis.

Kazantsakis was a man who throughout his life wrestled with the question of who Jesus is. One might say that his life was obsessed with the question. <sup>His</sup> ~~Kazantsakis~~' spiritual journey led him away from the Greek Orthodox Church in which he was baptized. He dabbled in Hinduism and Buddhism but (I read somewhere that) near the end of his life he did return to the Christian faith.

<sup>his book + The film based on it</sup>  
Although ~~the controversial film~~ portrays Christ in ways that go beyond the Gospel records and, from what I've read, even contradictory to it, there is something to be admired about a man who couldn't rest content with a second hand faith, but who struggled and searched to answer for himself who Jesus is.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they said, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." <sup>middle of Gospel</sup> ~~It's clear that from the very beginning of the~~ When we read the Gospels we discover that there were other answers, not so complimentary, given to the question. Some people said that Jesus was crazy, a blasphemer, a revolutionary, that he drank too much wine, that he was in cahoots with the devil. But the important thing is not what others say about Christ, but what we ourselves believe.

A Gallup Poll survey estimates 78 million US adults are "unchurched" compared with 61 million reported in 1978. But American adults who believe Jesus was either God or the son of God rose to 84% -- up from 78% in 1978. If Jesus were to ask us this morning, "Who do you say that I am?", a majority of people in the United States and, I'm sure nearly all of you in this sanctuary, and on the membership rolls, would answer, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But sometimes I wonder if all these people are simply repeating what others have said about Jesus, their parents, the church, but have never really wrestled with the question themselves. How do I know that Jesus is the Christ? How has that belief made any difference in my life?

I enjoy visiting and talking to unchurched, unreligious people. I genuinely like them. I rarely ever confront them with questions regarding their relationship to God and yet nearly always the conversation comes around to God, to Jesus. I know a woman, unchurched, who says she's an agnostic. Recently she read the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. It's a book about Jesus. It claims that Jesus was never crucified, that he lived to an old age, got married and had children whose descendants played an important role throughout medieval history. Now I don't agree with the book and yet I find it encouraging to find an unchurched agnostic interested enough, fascinated enough with the subject of Jesus, to read that book. I recently talked with an unchurched man and his wife who together read the book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. They wanted to know if I had read it and what I thought of it because it made them think of who Jesus is. I sometimes think that unchurched people wrestle more with the question, and more deeply, than church people.

Think again of rock music. I know that a lot of rock music deals with drugs and other anti-social attitudes and I'm not much into rock music nowadays, but I used to be. And whatever you say against rock music much of it forced me as an adolescent and young adult to wrestle with the question of who Jesus is. I think of the old Simon and Garfunkel recording, *Bridge over Troubled Waters* and how it goaded me to think about who Jesus is and what he came to do. I think of the songs of Bob Dylan whose music and lyrics became almost a religion to me when I was in college. So many of his lyrics and images pointed unmistakably to Jesus. I think of Joni Mitchell song in which she sang about Jesus. *And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the waters, and he spent a long time watching from a lonely wooden tower.* And I remember how I used the music of *Godspel* and *Jesus-Christ, Superstar* to provoke the thoughts of the senior high Sunday School class I had as a youth minister fresh out of seminary and to point them to Jesus. There's so much in the secular world, for all its evils, that still can point us to Jesus and force us to answer the haunting question Jesus asked Peter, "But who do you say that I am."

This is a question, I believe, that Jesus asks each one of us and in asking it he wants to goad us into a personal commitment to him. As young children we usually believe whatever our parents tell us about Jesus. They tell us that he's the Son of God, that he's God in the flesh. Every Sunday, before going to junior church, the children repeat in the Apostles' Creed, *I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord.* But there comes a time in our lives when a faith borrowed from church or parents becomes inadequate and seems irrelevant unless we come to our own decision about Jesus. We're not Christians because our parents are



believers. So often children who've been baptized, whose parents are committed Christians, grow up to repudiate the faith or show no interest in it. We become a Christian by a personal decision for Christ, when we can say to Jesus, with Peter, and from our hearts, "You are the Christ. You are the King. You are my Lord."

A borrowed faith won't hold us up when we go through deep waters. A borrowed faith won't give us the strength to stand up and speak out for what's right. A borrowed faith won't give us the courage to do what's right when everybody around us is doing what we know is wrong. A first hand faith is so urgent because of the trials, frustrations, disappointments, and disasters that we meet in life. The fact is, the hour may come when everything about you- your happiness, your grip on reality, your self-control, your very sanity - will depend on the degree to which you've built up, or have failed to build up, your faith in Jesus Christ.

But not only is a second hand faith inadequate to help us deal with personal crises, such a faith is going to make absolutely no impact whatever on the world in which we live unless it's our very own faith. There's nothing infectious about a second-hand faith. There's nothing infectious about telling a neighbor, "I believe that Jesus is the Messiah because that's what they teach at the Presbyterian church." There *is* something infectious about being able to say, "I know what others say about Jesus, but I have come to believe that Jesus reveals to me the very heart of God. He <sup>is</sup> ~~has become~~ my Lord and savior." What the world needs today is men and women and young people who, whether they say it with their lips or not, unmistakably declare it by their lives that Jesus is the Christ, God's anointed, the King of kings and Lord of Lords.

But how do we come to such a faith? I'm sure Peter's faith was

intensely personal but how can it ever be that for me? How can I come to the place in my life where I can confess with Peter, "You are the Christ."

I believe we get that faith in the same place Peter got it. By personal experiment. By the actual process of facing life with Christ. How did Peter come to possess his faith? It wasn't through speculation. His faith was the product of the impact made upon him, day in, day out, by the personality of Jesus. He came to realize who Jesus is as he lived with him and saw his grace and truth. By praying, by steeping yourself in the Gospels, by facing life with Christ, and, yes, I believe by becoming an active member in a community of faith where you study and pray together you can pass beyond a second hand religion or an inherited tradition and meet Christ face to face.

Amen

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, help us like Peter to trust you enough to obey you; to follow Jesus even though we may often fail; to love and trust Jesus so much that we will be able to deny ourselves whatever things there are in our lives that keep us from following Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.