

### The Life of the World - Part 3

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 21, 1994, the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69.

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

I want to talk to you this morning about the power of words, the ability of words to change lives, the power of the words of Jesus to change our lives, to turn our lives around, to give us eternal life, to lift us from despair to joy, to lift us out of the bondage of sin and guilt to the freedom of forgiveness. Words are the most powerful things in the world. Words are more powerful than bombs. Words have changed the course of history.

Jesus says, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." I want to talk to you about what Jesus meant and what Peter meant. I want to share with you how the words of Jesus are spirit and life to me.

First, I want to put this in the context of something Philip and I experienced this past week. Wednesday evening Philip and I sat out in the pouring rain for three hours in the Hershey stadium to hear Bob Dylan sing. When I was a radical young man in the sixties I came into contact with the music of Bob Dylan. It wasn't his voice that arrested my attention. He has a terrible voice. It was his words, the words of his songs. I think the first song I heard him sing was, "The times, they are a changing."

The times were changing. The sixties were a decade of <sup>bewildering</sup> change. There was the civil rights marches and legislation. The assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Thousands of deaths of soldiers and civilians in Viet Nam. There was the sexual revolution after the pill and before AIDS. There was a hope, a dream, a longing to get ourselves back to the garden of Eden. Some of us thought it

was possible. The times were a'changing. And the words of Bob Dylan, for me, captured the spirit of the times.

His songs contained a message, a different message than the Beach Boys or Frankie Avalon. He sang of justice and freedom and peace in a world that would never be the same again. He sang of racism and poverty and the hypocrisy of so much of life. There was a distinctly theological ring to his songs. His songs were filled with biblical images and allusions.

I borrowed money from friends to buy his latest albums and then I'd listen to his words over and over. I'd copy down the words and gather with friends to ponder the sometimes abstruse meaning of his words. <sup>hard & difficult at times to understand</sup> In the sixties I had a lot of questions about the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, a lot of doubts about ~~who~~ Jesus ~~is~~ - but I was utterly convinced of the infallibility of Bob Dylan. So last Wednesday I got to hear Bob Dylan in person. We had excellent tickets, about 30 yards from the platform.

Now, if you had asked me, thirty years ago, to prove the authority of <sup>The words of</sup> Bob Dylan I'd have said, "Prove it? How do you prove it? Just listen to what he's saying. Listen to his words."

Now there's an infinitely qualitative distinction between the words of Bob Dylan and the words of Jesus Christ. I want to make that clear. I, in no way, equate the words of Bob Dylan with the words of Jesus Christ even though there was a girl sitting behind us, Wednesday evening, yelling at the top of her lungs, "Bob Dylan is God."

But there's an analogy to the authority of the words of Jesus. <sup>made</sup> Jesus' outrageous <sup>(+ I believe</sup> <sup>true</sup> claims that Bob Dylan never made about himself. Jesus claimed to have come down from heaven. He claimed that eternal life comes through him alone. In him we see

human life as God created us to be. If we want to know what it means to be truly human, we look at Jesus, we study Jesus. He's the only one to have lived an authentically human life. But in him we also see God in the flesh. On the cross we see the true nature of our sin. We see on the cross God's wrath and curse against human sin. But in Jesus we also see God's grace, love and mercy. On the cross we see God taking upon himself our judgment and death- and giving us life - eternal life.

How do you prove it? It can't be proved. It's self-authenticating. Just like the words of Bob Dylan were self-authenticating to me. How do you prove that the words of Jesus are spirit and life? It's not something that you can prove scientifically. You've got to listen to his words like I use to listen to the words of Bob Dylan. We've got to digest his words, ruminate upon them, allow them to search out the depths of our souls. We've got to respond to those words, obey them, trust them. That's how it's proved.

How do you prove that the promises a man or woman make in marriage are true and authentic unless we respond and live out the promises. There's no way you can prove ahead of time that a man or woman will be faithful to their vows. The proof is in the living of life together.

There are basically two kinds of authority. There's, for example, the authority that a police officer has because she's been given that authority by the city, county or state. She proves her authority by her uniform, and by showing her badge. She's earned that authority by attending classes and passing tests that qualify her for her job as a police officer. She has no authority in and of herself. Her authority is derived. You may doubt her authority or deny it. When she pulls you over for speeding you may not believe that she's a police officer. You may say, "Well, I've never met a woman police officer."

Her authority is not self-authenticating.

But there's another kind of authority - a self authenticating authority. That's the kind of authority that Jesus has. I think of the authority my mother had over me when I was a child. Her authority was a self authenticating authority. When she say, "Teddy!" I listened. When she said, "Do this!" I did it. If I had dared to ask, "What's the basis of your authority?" she'd have shown me. Her authority was not derived from anyone else except, of course, from God. The authority of the Word of Jesus is like that. His words are self-authenticating. They can't be proved scientifically. They can, however, be proved in our own experience by listening and trusting and obeying and following.

I think of St. Anthony living in Egypt 250 years after Jesus. He went to church one Sunday as he had always done and the minister read the words of Jesus, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him sell all that he has, give to the poor, and come follow me." Those words were spirit and life to Anthony. He left the worship service immediately, sold all that he had and distributed the money to the poor and went into the wilderness of the desert to pray and read the scripture. Then he return to preach the Word of Christ and was used wonderfully to bring new life to the Egyptian church. The words of Jesus were for him spirit and life. They were self-authenticating words. He listened and obeyed and trusted and proved them to be words of eternal life in his own experience.

I think again of someone more contemporary. Emille Cailliet was professor of Christian Philosophy at Princeton Seminary until his retirement. He has since died. But he had never even seen a Bible until he was in his twenties. He received an excellent, although thoroughly secular philosophical education, in France. But his heart yearned

for the word of life. He used to clip out the sayings of philosophers and poets and paste them in a scrapbook. He would read these words for inspiration and uplifting much as I listened to the words of Bob Dylan. But those words were not spirit and life - they were not the words of eternal life. Though beautiful, they left him dissatisfied.

One day his young wife came home with a Bible given to her, by chance, by a French Reformed minister into whose church she had entered just to look around. When she came home, Cailliet asked, "What's that book?" "It's a Bible." "A Bible? I've never read the Bible. Let me see." He took the Bible into his study and opened it, by chance to the Gospel of John. He read the Gospel throughout the evening into the early hours of the morning and he said, "The One of whom the Gospel spoke, spoke to me." Christ spoke to him, not mystically, but in and through the words that bore witness to him in the Gospel. Cailliet was addressed by the authority of the Word of Christ. He recognized Christ's words to be spirit and life - the very words of eternal life.

There are moments when words come alive. There are moments when we stop what we're doing and gather around the radio and listen to hear a president tell us if it's war or peace. There are times when a "goodbye" is a real "God-be-with-you", and "How are you?" is an anxious appeal to a friend who has just had a serious accident. Books that bored us when we were at school may spring to life for us at a later age. The Word of Christ is like that. We may go for years and not hear anything that seems to address us and then something happens and Christ speaks to us a life changing word.

The contemporaries of Jesus had heard millions of religious words and many of them were dead. But when Jesus talked of God and God's kingdom, they sat up and said, "Never man spoke like this man." "He speaks as one with authority, and not as the

scribes and pharisees." This is why Jesus could say so convincingly, "The words which I have spoken to you are both spirit and life."

At the end of Albert Schweitzer's classic, The Quest for the Historical Jesus, he writes of Jesus, "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is."

Listen to the word of Christ! Read the Scripture! Read it from Genesis to Revelation! Read it, not for information about the ancient world. Read it, not in order to augur the future like you might do from reading a horoscope or going to a psychic. Read it to hear the life changing word of Christ.

The word of Christ is not merely good advice. If all you want is good advice go to the self help section in Border's Bookstore. There you'll find books that will give you all kinds of good advice as to how to deal with your anger, raise your kids, and make lots of money. But the Word of Christ is not good advice - it's good news - it's spirit and life. Many Christians don't understand that the sermon is intended not to be a lecture - not primarily for the giving of information - or even the giving of practical help and advice. The sermon is intended to set before us Jesus Christ as nourishment for the soul - as spirit and life.

Let us pray: Lord, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life."