

## We Proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Transfiguration of the Lord, February 10, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1-12a; Psalm 50:1-6; Mark 9:2-9, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6.

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

Does God blame unbelievers for their unbelief? Listen carefully to what St. Paul said about unbelievers. You may be surprised.

"The God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the Image of God."

Unbelievers, Paul says, have been blinded. In a sense God doesn't blame them for their unbelief. It's not their fault. They're victims. What Paul says reminds me of an incident in the Gospel of John, chapter 9. Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man or his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Think now of unbelievers and all those who don't see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Is it their sin that keeps them from seeing the light of the gospel? Or can we blame their parents or church for their unbelief. I can imagine Paul saying, "No! It's not their sin. It's not the sin of their parents or church. An enemy has blinded them but only so that God's works might be revealed in them."

Paul calls this enemy, "The God of this world." The God of this world has many disguises. Money, power, success, nationalism, sex, and many other things blind people and keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. So, for Paul, unbelievers have been victimized. They've been blinded by an enemy.

Many Presbyterians, I believe, are unbelievers in the sense that they don't see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Both unbelievers and Presbyterians may be good citizens, loving parents, hard workers, but, clearly a lot of Presbyterians don't see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. They just don't see how important Jesus Christ is. Over six million people in the United States say they're affiliated with the Presbyterian church but there are only about half that many, three million, on our membership rolls. Only about 40% of those are in church on any given Sunday or participate in a Sunday School class, or attend a small group Bible study, or read the Bible on a daily basis, or share their faith with others, or speak out on some public issue because of their faith in Jesus Christ. There's very little that distinguishes many Presbyterians from unbelievers. That disturbs me. One of my primary desires as a minister is for people to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy was an Anglican priest and a much loved chaplain during WWI. He shared my desire for people to see God in the face of Jesus Christ.

He once wrote, "When I had been in France as a chaplain about two months, before I'd heard a gun fired or seen a trench, I went to see an officer in a base hospital who was slowly recovering from very serious wounds. The conversation turned on religion, and he seemed anxious to get to the truth. He asked me a tremendous question."

"What I want to know, Padre," he said, "is, what is God like? I never thought much about it before this war. I took the world for granted. I wasn't religious, though I was confirmed and went to Communion sometimes with my wife. But now it seems different. What is God like?"

"When the answer was put to me in the hospital I pointed to a crucifix which hung over the officer's bed, and said, 'Yes, I think I can tell you. God is like that.'"

"'What do you mean?' he said. 'God can't be like that. God is Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. Monarch of the world, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, Whose will sways all the world. That's a battered, wounded, bleeding figure, nailed to a cross and helpless, defeated by the world and broken in all but spirit. That's not God.'"

It's so hard for people to see God in the face of Jesus Christ because the God of this world has blinded them to what success, power and lordship is all about. Jesus redefines all those terms. Victory, success, power and lordship are completely redefined when we look at the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus actually redefines the word *God*. In Jesus we see that God is a suffering God, a God who feels pain and hunger, a God who knows what it's like to be the victim of injustice, to be homeless and a refugee. In Jesus we see a God who knows what it's like to feel guilt, to feel hopeless, because on the cross God, in Christ, took all our sin and guilt upon himself and, in the darkness of Good Friday, experienced our darkness and despair.

But how can we get blind people to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? I thought long and hard about that this past week. How do you get a blind person to understand what you're talking about when you speak of the blue sky and the green grass? And as I thought, I remembered the story of Annie Sullivan, the teacher of Helen Keller, whose life was portrayed in the Broadway play, the Miracle Worker.

When Helen Keller was born she could see and hear like other children. But when she was a year and a half old she became very ill. Fever burned her

small body. The doctors couldn't help. Her mother and father were afraid Helen would die.

At last Helen got better, but the fever left a terrible mark. When her mother brought a lamp, Helen didn't look at the bright light. When her father clapped his hands loudly, she didn't turn toward the sound. Then they knew that their little girl was blind and deaf.

Helen was soon well and strong again. When she grew older she wanted to run and play. But when she ran she crashed into trees and fences or fell and hurt herself.

Other children were afraid to play with her because she often hit them roughly and broke their toys. Even the family's dog ran away from her. Helen didn't understand that anyone had feelings except herself. At the dinner table she was like a savage. She grabbed food off other people's plates and threw temper tantrums if she didn't always get her own way. As she grew older her temper tantrums and bad behavior grew worse.

"But we can't punish her if she doesn't understand," her father, Captain Keller would say. "If we could only find someone who could help her."

One day, when Helen was about six years old, a stranger, a young woman named Annie Sullivan, came to live with the Kellers. She had come to be Helen's teacher. Annie had been almost blind herself. When she was sixteen, an operation helped her to see again. Now Annie was 21. Her eyes were still weak, but she had started out to earn her living as a teacher.

The next weeks were an adventure for Helen. Annie gave her beads and cards to play with. She liked their long walks through the cool woods. They rode horseback together. Annie led Helen's pony. Whatever they did Annie spelled letters into Helen's hand. When they petted the cat Annie spelled "C-A-T." Helen quickly learned to imitate Annie's fingers. She could make the

letters for "C-A-K-E" when she wanted a snack, and "M-I-L-K" when she was thirsty. Helen learned the signs but she didn't know what they meant. She was like a lot of people today who know the word *god* but don't know what that word means.

Then something happened that changed Helen's whole life. Helen held her hand under the spout of an old fashioned pump while Annie pumped. As cold water poured over Helen's hand, Annie spelled in her other hand "W-A-T-E-R." A new expression came into Helen's face. She spelled *water* several times herself. Helen jumped up. She suddenly realized that she was understanding words. She pointed to Annie, and Annie spelled "T-E-A-C-H-E-R." Helen never called Annie by an other name. Then Helen pointed herself and Annie slowly spelled out "H-E-L-E-N K-E-L-L-E-R." Helen's face broke into a wide smile. It was the first time she knew that she had a name.

When Helen went to bed that night she kissed her teacher for the first time. Annie wrote, "I thought my heart would burst with joy."

Helen herself said many years later, "I was born again that day. I had been a little ghost in a *no-world*. Now I knew my name. I was a person. I could understand people and make them understand me."

It seems to me that God wants us to be Annie Sullivans. Our job as Christians is to help blind people see the invisible God in the person of Jesus Christ. Like Helen Keller, most people know the word *god* but they don't know what that word means because the god of this world has blinded them. So when that word is used we need to point not to power and success and health and wealth but we need to point to Jesus Christ and him crucified. And, by the grace of God, the word *god* will take on new meaning. And when that happens people will know that they're loved by God, that they have a name, that they're understood by God.

All around us there are people whom the God of this world has blinded. They can't see any sign of God in their lives or in the world. In every congregation there are some who wonder, "Does God know my misery and heartache? Does God know of the wrong and misery in the world? Is God a god who can bring me hope and a new beginning when I've done something that makes me hate myself and leaves me feeling wretched and ashamed?"

*James S. Stewart*

And if we ourselves have seen the light of the gospel in the face of Jesus Christ we can point to him and say, "Yes! God does know. God can bring you hope and a new beginning." *If you have seen him, you have seen God.*

We don't proclaim ourselves. We don't make ourselves out to be super Christians. We don't make ourselves out to be better than unbelievers. We don't proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servant's for Jesus Christ's sake.

Let us pray: O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sources:

G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, *The Hardest Part*.  
Graff, Stewart and Polly Anne, Helen Keller.

*James S. Stewart, A Faith to Proclaim*